WHY TAIWAN IS NOT CHINA IAN BURUMA

THE

NEW REPUBLIC

Darwin and Rape
Jerry A. Coyne

Putin and Democracy
Masha Gessen

APRIL 3, 2000

TO: Al Gore
RE: V.P. Choices

- ❑ George Mitchell
- ❑ Dianne Feinstein
- ❑ Bill Richardson
- ❑ Bob Graham
- ☑ **None of the Above**

Why there aren't any good Democratic running mates

By WILLIAM SALETAN

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Teach your children well?

TO THE EDITORS:

In "Short Fall" (February 28), Matthew Miller covers every topic but one: tracking, whereby students with similar scholastic abilities are taught together. I went through the public school system during the 1950s, when tracking was the rule. The obvious advantage to this system is that teaching is much more productive when the teacher can narrow the focus of instruction. The elimination of tracking during the '60s is one of many reasons (the rest thoroughly covered by Miller) the public school system is failing our youth.

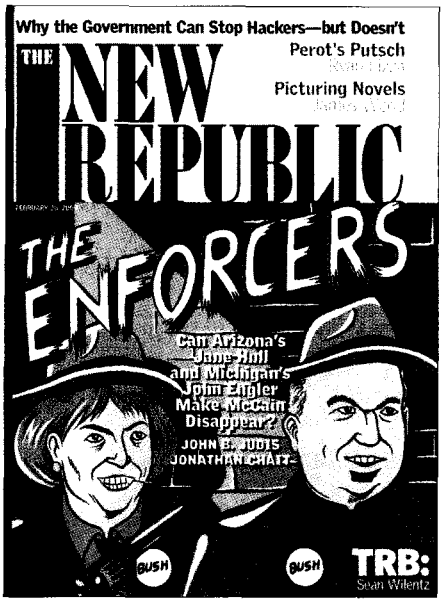
CHARLES A. PARDEE, JR.
Spring Island, South Carolina

TO THE EDITORS:

Matthew Miller dances around the fundamental economic issue driving the decline in the quantity and quality of public school teachers, but he never quite nails it. There is little use in arguing about whether teaching is a craft or a profession, because it is a craft in the technical sense of the term: teaching is an industry that experiences near-zero productivity growth.

The country gets wealthier each year because it produces more each year. The incremental wealth created is distributed to those responsible for generating it, through higher investment returns and increased wages (assuming that capital and labor markets are functioning effectively). Over time, workers gravitate to industries experiencing productivity gains because these industries can offer higher wages. Since craft industries don't generate productivity gains, they can only pay their workers at competitive rates if they increase real prices at the rate of productivity growth experienced by the rest of the economy. Ultimately, such price increases are unsustainable, and craft industries eventually disappear.

Public education hasn't disappeared, because there is a general public commitment to it. However, this commitment has not translated into a willingness to devote the resources needed to raise teachers' salaries at a rate that would allow teaching to remain competitive with the other job alternatives available to prospective teachers. That is as near a conscious decision to reduce the quality of public education as one can fathom. Schools simply no longer attract the quality of instructors they did a generation ago. Do you ever wonder why TV shows from the 1950s depict teachers leading middle- to upper-middle-class lives, while today they all seem to be on the edge of poverty?



Education managers need to find ways to make teachers more productive—and jamming students into classrooms does not qualify—by applying new technologies and introducing process improvements, such as those Miller suggests. Meanwhile, public education authorities need to increase wages to a level at which teaching can attract the quality of people it requires and, in doing so, restore the profession to the social and economic status that many of us think it deserves.

DAVID EDWARDS
PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Atlanta, Georgia

Case closed?

TO THE EDITORS:

John B. Judis notes that Arizona Attorney General Grant Woods had a falling-out with John McCain because Woods refused to close the case against then-Governor Fife Symington ("Favorite Son?," February 28). Is that what Woods told Judis? It was the U.S. attorney's office that prosecuted and gained convictions against Symington. So what was the real reason for the falling-out? A former Arizonan wants to know.

GARY CROOKS
Spokane, Washington

JOHN B. JUDIS REPLIES:

Grant Woods didn't return my call when I was in Arizona, but several people told me about his experiences with John McCain. In addition, his complaints have been widely reported in Arizona and in national papers. Here is *The Boston Globe*, December 13, 1999: "Former attorney general Grant Woods, once so close to McCain that he is godfather to one of his children, no longer talks to him, embittered by what he says were McCain's efforts to dictate how he ran his office. Most memorable: A belligerent McCain, Woods said, twice upbraided him for investigating allegations against Governor Fife Symington, a McCain ally whose office Woods was investigating for bid-rigging and who was later convicted of fraudulent business practices. McCain's overtures, in Woods's view, bordered on being improper."

Chronic fatigue syndrome

TO THE EDITORS:

Sean Wilentz has missed an important factor in the trumped-up phenomenon called "Clinton fatigue" ("Yawn," February 28)—that hundreds of reporters, editorialists, and talking heads either were very wrong about the events of the impeachment or allowed themselves to become participants in the process. So they try to give Clinton the bum's rush instead of undertaking a thorough examination of the media as partisan newsmakers in Clinton's presidency.

In various hot spots on the Internet there is plenty of fervor and love and praise for Clinton. It takes a real man to survive such an onslaught with grace and the simple determination to get the job done. If members of the press would start recognizing Clinton's strength and investigating those who tried to bring him down, they might be able to undo some of the damage they have inflicted.

EILEEN SMITH
Salem, Oregon

TO THE EDITORS:

Ronald Reagan always ran better in real elections than in the "polls," racking up 52 percent in a three-way race in 1980 and 59 percent in the straight match with Walter Mondale in 1984. By instructive contrast, Clinton won 43 percent in a three-way race in 1992 and 49 percent in 1996. Clinton is the only Democratic president besides Andrew Johnson to preside over a Republican Congress for most of his time in office. Sean Wilentz's claim to the contrary notwithstanding, "job-approval ratings" are widely regarded by serious pollsters as measures of public perception of how the country is doing, not of approval of the president. Does Wilentz really think George Bush won in 1988 in spite of attitudes toward Reagan?

In 1996, polls showed Clinton winning by double digits right up to Election Day. The *New York Times*/CBS poll had him up by 18 points. He won by eight, against a

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shopworn Bob Dole. I am not arguing that polls are useless, but they have to be looked at with some sophistication.

MARK RICHARD
Worthington, Ohio

Insecure

TO THE EDITORS:

John Simons's denunciation of harmful encryption-export restrictions ("Federal Reserve," February 28) seems at odds with his article's concluding call for increased government regulation of the Internet. The author correctly cites counterproductive encryption-technology restrictions (last revised in January 2000, not December 1999, as the article implies) as a factor that contributes to Internet security problems. But Simons's enthusiasm for new regulations aimed at ensuring online security is puzzling. According to the article, regulations must be adopted because otherwise network administrators have no incentive to employ protective software technologies. I wonder if those in charge at Yahoo!, eBay, or any of the other websites recently attacked would agree.

The fact that market forces keep businesses accountable and consumers in control means that inefficient government regulations are not necessary. After all, as Simons inadvertently notes, they often have harmful, unintended consequences.

JESSICA MELUGIN
Internet Policy Analyst
The Competitive Enterprise Institute
Washington, D.C.

TO THE EDITORS:

I am a security specialist, not a "cyber anarchist," but I find John Simons's proposal for government regulation of the Internet to be both highly undesirable and ultimately infeasible. The power of the Internet springs from growth and innovation that occur at a pace which would not be possible with governmental regulation. "Internet time" is not just a buzzword—governments cannot react to the technology at a pace that accommodates the innovation. Even the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), cited in the article, often approves "standards" on an ex post facto basis. The government cannot even establish and enforce meaningful Internet security standards for itself.

As a matter of public policy, it seems both inefficient and undesirable to try to ensure the security of the entire Internet. A company like Yahoo! is vulnerable because it is built on the idea of completely universal access—eyeballs are its business. Should Yahoo! wish to better secure its website, it can, but the number of visitors will decrease. No "secure" network would permit universal access. Methods for protecting what needs to be protected are available in the marketplace and work very well. Most security breaches are insider jobs, not hacks.

Simons also attributes an absurd amount of power to the IETF. Yes, the group does good and useful work, but its "standards" are simply guidelines in the marketplace. Many very successful companies ignore or adapt these standards if the market warrants.

The Internet is a global phenomenon—it is not feasible for the United States to attempt to regulate it. I take it as a given that Simons would not want, say, a European or Asian administrator establishing Internet standards. And I'm sure our Internet companies would not support this.

SAMUEL L. EARP
President
SLE Associates
McLean, Virginia

TO THE EDITORS:

John Simons suggests that encryption would have helped prevent the recent spate of denial-of-service attacks. While increased use of encryption would be useful in improving overall network security and reliability, it is unlikely to address that particular problem. In these attacks, hackers exploited well-known implementation flaws in popular operating systems to gain control of a large number of machines at universities and in other open environments. Fixes for the vulnerabilities that were exploited were readily available at the time of the attacks, but the owners of the systems had not installed them, for a variety of reasons. Thus, forcing the manufacturers to implement protocols correctly or to implement encryption would not have helped. Since fixes were available from the manufacturer, for them to be effective in the way Simons suggests would require that a "protocol police" inspect every computer to make sure the software is up-to-date. This seems less than realistic.

Simons also indicates that the IETF has 200 members. I do not know where that number comes from, since the IETF is not a membership organization with a roster of dues-paying members. If one uses the number of people attending IETF meetings as a measure of size, a better approximation would be 2,400, the number who attended the November 1999 meeting in Washington, D.C.

HENNING SCHULZRINNE
Department of Computer Science
Columbia University
New York, New York

JOHN SIMONS REPLIES:

Several readers assert that the federal government could never certify the security of every large-scale computer on the global network. This may be true. But the United States could certainly empower an international organization, like the IETF, to promote, and perhaps enforce, worldwide security. The U.S. Y2K effort is a good model. A top-level federal office made certain that all federal computers were compliant, while also keeping tabs on remediation progress in the private sector. This was not "regulation" in the strict sense. Old-guard Internet mavens may bristle at the thought of any government oversight of their digital world, but, as the Internet becomes more enmeshed in our global economy, the government's role must—and will—become greater. It is, therefore, wise for knowledgeable netizens to measure out the exact parameters of future government supervision rather than turn a blind eye to it.

As for the number of IETF "members," I used a rough estimate of the number of engineers who regularly participate in the organization's ongoing working groups.

Fyodor?

TO THE EDITORS:

Thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing back Douglas McGrath ("Boris?," February 28). I missed his wicked sense of humor terribly. Of course, I still enjoyed TNR in his absence, but it's been a long time since I tore open each issue the minute it hit my mailbox. With McGrath—er, Fyodor—as my guide, this eight-month campaign is going to seem like eight minutes.

ELAINE BENNETT
Maplewood, New Jersey

Lost in translation

TO THE EDITORS:

Nicholas Howe's review of Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* translation ("Scullion-speak," February 28) is dead on, except in one detail. Howe states that among the previous translators of *Beowulf*, only two (William Morris and C.K. Scott-Moncrieff) have a "larger literary reputation." Howe is forgetting that *Beowulf* was also translated by William Alfred, author of the well-known *Hogan's Goat* and other plays. It is a pity that Alfred's fine *Beowulf* translation is so often overlooked. I do thank Howe, though, for a generally astute review.

RANDI ELDEVIK
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FROM WASHINGTON

Tax Base

ANOTHER CAMPAIGN SEASON, another set of plans from would-be "education presidents" that sound nice but tinker at the margins. George W. Bush speaks of "leaving no child behind." Al Gore touts a "revolution" of smaller classes and modest raises for teachers. Then they show you the money. Bush's chief initiative changes the criteria for aid to high-poverty areas but adds little to the nation's education dollar. Gore, though more ambitious, would still lift school spending by only about three percent yearly, less than he hikes defense. Money isn't everything, of course, but for poor districts struggling to teach America's neediest children it's a lot—especially when such districts have less cash than wealthier suburbs, whose kids come to school without the problems associated with poverty. With voters saying they'd like the feds to do more and with surpluses making fresh action possible, isn't it time a candidate made a federal case out of the unjust way America funds schools through local property taxes?

Before anyone screams "Socialist!" and flees the room, take note: The newest crusader against our property-tax-based school-finance system is a rising Republican star. Lisa Graham Keegan, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction, will likely be on Bush's shortlist for secretary of education, should he win. And, while she's earned her conservative stripes as a voucher fan who's presided over the nation's largest charter school experiment, on school finance she sounds more like Michael Harrington than Barry Goldwater.

"It's a pernicious system," Keegan says of the property tax, because it simultaneously guarantees the nation's richest citizens lower taxes and better schools. The math is simple. Imagine two cities, Poortown and Tonyville. Poortown has $100,000 in taxable property per pupil; Tonyville has $300,000. If Poortown taxes its property at four percent, it raises $4,000 per pupil. But Tonyville can tax itself at two percent and raise $6,000 per pupil. Tonyville's tax rate is half as high, but its public schools enjoy 50 percent more resources per student.

In 35 states, such grim math makes the tax burden in poor districts more than twice as high as in rich ones. The federal mortgage interest deduction adds insult to injury, giving better-off homeowners a backdoor school subsidy (helping them live near better schools) that's about eight times greater than federal aid to poor schools.

"We shouldn't have situations," says Keegan, "in which, depending on the part of town you live in, that's how much resources are available to you or your parents." Yet, after decades of school-equity litigation and anti-poverty programs, that's precisely what we do have. A new analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that most poor students still live in districts that spend less per student than their states' average; one in four poor kids get between ten and 30 percent less. In many places the gap is more dramatic. In Illinois, according to a 1997 report by the nonpartisan General Accounting Office, richer districts spend 67 percent more per pupil than poorer districts. In Maryland the figure is 65 percent; in Massachusetts, 54 percent.

These inequities prompt not a peep on the stump. "At the national level we talk about school finance, but in code," says Chaka Fattah, a Democratic congressman from Philadelphia. Debates about inequities in class size, school construction, and technology in the classroom, he argues, are all proxies for fights about school funding. But no one directly questions the source of the gap between education's haves and have-nots.

That's partly because there's a cottage industry devoted to "proving" that money has nothing to do with educational quality. How else could overall school spending have surged since the 1970s, this group reckons, while test scores remained flat? High-spending wastelands like Newark, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.—cities that have traditions of treating the school system as a jobs program—give ammunition to conservatives who sensibly resist pouring good money after bad.

But not every poor district is like this. What's more, an upcoming study by the RAND Corporation—hardly a liberal haven—suggests that money does indeed matter for disadvantaged students. It's not hard to see why: With much district spending going for teachers' salaries, there's no way to draw talent to the toughest classrooms if you have far less to spend than nearby suburbs. "If money doesn't matter," concludes Howard Fuller, a former Milwaukee superintendent, "how come [districts] who have it fight so hard to hold on to it?" Last year in Vermont, for instance, wealthy residents protested a court-ordered state equalization plan that asked them to raise their property tax rates to levels still *less than* the rate at which poorer districts have taxed themselves for decades.

"Local control"—the other rallying cry that keeps financial equity off the national radar screen—makes sense at first blush. But it's one thing to assert local prerogative in areas like curriculum and textbooks, where the locals really can make better decisions than national bureaucrats. It's another, Keegan suggests, when her better-off constituents defend their right to tax themselves at rates they choose when this means poorer districts must tax themselves more to produce less. "This is about lower tax rates for the wealthy," she concludes, "not local control."

Suppose everyone agreed that the education of millions of poor kids was a national priority and that financial fairness played a role. What might a presidential candidate do? At various times, assorted worthies have urged the federal government to pick up as much as a third of national K-12 costs (it covers seven percent today). Most advanced nations, they argue, see school funding as a national responsibility.

A bold agenda might require states to invest roughly equal resources in every student as a condition of receiving federal school aid, as provided in legislation offered by Fattah. The surplus-rich feds could also spend $20 billion remedying the huge interstate (as opposed to intrastate) per-pupil funding gap, as analysts Stephen Sugarman and Richard Rothstein have separately proposed. This would chiefly benefit the poorer Southern and Western states, where many flush districts spend less than low-spending Eastern towns, leaving students without amenities richer kids take for granted. Finally, Uncle Sam could subsidize school construction in poorer districts, whose crumbling buildings account for most of the nation's $100 billion school-repairs backlog.

The problem, of course, is that conservatives would fight such proposals tooth and nail. Getting them to sign on may, as Arizona's Keegan suggests, require liberals to accept bigger voucher and charter school experiments as part of the bargain. The left would get spending equity; the right would bust the public school monopoly. The good news is that an official like Keegan is laying out the kind of unconventional synthesis we need. The bad news is that another presidential year seems likely to pass without any candidate having the wit or the courage to seize it.

MATTHEW MILLER

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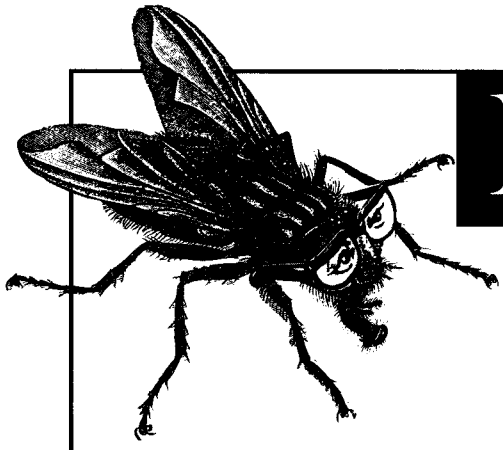

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Yelling "Fire"

ONCE UPON A TIME, the National Rifle Association made a principled argument: The Second Amendment guarantees people the right to bear arms, and the government shouldn't interfere. Yes, some people will die because guns are legal, but so what? Some people die because the Fourth Amendment keeps the government from busting into the houses of potential criminals. That's the cost of freedom.

We disagreed with that argument, but we respected it. But who can respect the NRA's transparent efforts to cast itself as the champion of existing gun-control laws? According to NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre, the Clinton administration hasn't prosecuted enough of the people who fail criminal background checks, as the Brady Bill requires. So felons stay on the street and commit more crimes. LaPierre's poster boy is Benjamin Smith, who last summer went on a shooting spree that left nine people wounded and two dead. As LaPierre tells it, Smith should have been arrested before his deadly rampage—when he tried to buy a gun from a licensed firearms dealer in Illinois and a background check turned up a restraining order. But Smith wasn't arrested; instead, he went to an unlicensed dealer, bought two handguns, and proceeded on his bloody mission. Enforcement of existing laws, LaPierre insists, not the establishment of new ones, would have prevented those murders.

But LaPierre's argument has almost no basis in reality. First, prosecutions for gun violations—at both the federal and state levels—have *increased* since Clinton took office. Second, in most states, including Illinois, the state authorities, not the feds, conduct background checks.

And these are only LaPierre's factual errors. His logic is worse. Simply put, the enforcement of current laws requires *new* laws—laws the NRA steadfastly opposes. The Smith case nicely illustrates the problem. Consider the unlicensed dealer who sold Smith his handguns. The dealer amassed his stock of guns by outmaneuvering a federal law that requires gun stores to report the sale of two or more guns at a time to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). He got around it by purchasing 65 handguns, one at a time, from the same store. This loophole could be easily closed with a new law that permitted only one handgun purchase a month, thereby preventing unlicensed dealers from amassing vast arsenals. But the NRA opposes this law. NRA lobbying has also kept private dealers in most states free to sell guns without conducting background checks and without keeping records of their sales. And, without those records, it is much harder to detect gun trafficking or enforce the current laws.

What's more, the federal agency charged with enforcing gun laws is the ATF—the very institution whose agents LaPierre once labeled "jackbooted government thugs." Indeed, NRA muscle has helped *decrease* the size of the ATF relative to other government agencies and to the number of firearms in the country. In 1973, for instance, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the ATF had about the same number of employees and the same amount of money; by 1998 the DEA's budget and staff were nearly three times the ATF's.

Last January, Clinton unveiled the National Gun Enforcement Initiative, which would earmark $280 million in the 2001 budget for 500 new ATF agents and more than 1,000 new federal, state, and local prosecutors. But the NRA has been notably silent about the effort. And with good reason. LaPierre's talk of enforcement is hot air. What he really wants—and what the NRA has always wanted—is for the government to leave gun owners alone.

But it won't. Columbine changed everything, and in the past few weeks even staunchly pro-gun Republicans like J.C. Watts have started jumping ship. Worse, so are some of the gun companies. Smith & Wesson, the nation's largest handgun manufacturer, has agreed to install a number of safety features on all its guns in return for an end to lawsuits against the firm. If the NRA had any foresight, it would realize that such settlements are the only way the gun industry can escape an imminent storm of litigation. If the NRA had any political sense, it would applaud Smith & Wesson's decision to install trigger locks on all its guns. But it won't, because underneath its new veneer the NRA is the same organization it has always been. It believes government should keep its nose out of people's guns. That's a principled stand—a principled stand that this magazine and most Americans find utterly loony. Why doesn't Wayne LaPierre say what he really believes? After all, he's going to lose either way. ■

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NOTEBOOK

NEVER MIND: On March 16, in case you missed it, Robert Ray, the independent counsel who succeeded Kenneth Starr, reported that he had found no "substantial and credible evidence" that senior White House officials helped obtain confidential FBI background reports on their political enemies. In other words, Filegate was what the Clintons always claimed it was: a bureaucratic snafu. The newspapers greeted the news with a yawn (*The Washington Post* played the story on page four). Politicians and pundits ignored it too, which is convenient, considering what some of them said at the time. William Safire, for instance, once speculated that "because some Clinton appointees had drug problems in their pasts, White House operatives may have felt that a supply of political mud was needed to drive off potential critics." John Fund of *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page, appearing on CNN, likened Filegate to Watergate, noting that there was a "gap" in the files reminiscent of the gap in the Nixon tapes. Republican Representative Chris Shays of Connecticut said White House aides who testified that the file flap was an innocent error were "definitely stonewalling." And then there's Larry Klayman. During a 1998 speech before a business group in Miami, White House aide Paul Begala

OUT OF THIN AIR: Vice presidential rumors often seem to emerge from nowhere. But that's not quite right. It's more accurate to say they often emerge for no good reason. Here's a sample of somewheres promoting various Democratic candidates, along with their not-so-good reasons.

	Likely originator:	The reason:
Governor **Gary Locke** Washington	**Charlie Cook**, who touted Locke, along with a host of others, as a potential vice president in his February 13, 1999, column in "National Journal."	"I think anybody who purports to have any inside information on v.p.'s is either a liar or a fool, because I don't think there is any inside information, because I don't think there has been any serious thought on either side. What we did a year ago, and have done since then, is canvass the usual suspects, looking through the Senate, the governors, current and former Cabinet members, and all the places people might normally look for running mates ... which I think is a legitimate exercise...."
U.S. Senator **John Edwards** North Carolina	"Wall Street Journal" columnist **Al Hunt**, who floated Edwards's name on CNN's "Capital Gang" on December 25, 1999.	"I wish I could tell you I researched this from nineteen different sources, but it was really more of an intuitive sense.... They asked us to come up with two names.... You know, it was television."
U.S. Senator **Bob Graham,** Florida	Although Graham has been a quadrennial veepstakes contender since 1988, the current round of speculation, according to most of the reporters doing the speculating, is being fed by **Bob Butterworth**, Florida's attorney general and Gore's Florida campaign chairman.	"I'm a very good friend of Senator Graham's, and we go back thirty years in politics.... Just on paper Bob Graham is one of the best-qualified people to be vice president.... I told him, 'I'm going to be advocating for you to be vice president.'"
Governor **Angus King** Maine	**George Stephanopoulos,** whose mention of the previously unmentioned independent governor's name on ABC's "This Week" on March 12 prompted King to send out his press secretary to reassure Maine voters that he had no interest in leaving them for Washington.	"I hadn't heard his name before, but it made sense. If you want to appeal to independent voters, choose an independent."
Former U.S. Senator **George Mitchell** Maine	Omnipresent "Wall Street Journal" columnist **Al Hunt**, whose floating of Mitchell's name in a March 9 column appeared to spark the Mitchell boomlet.	"I have been a George Mitchell sycophant for twenty years."
Governor **Jeanne Shaheen,** New Hampshire	**David Nyhan,** who in his March 21, 1999, "Boston Globe" column touted Shaheen as a potential veep.	"The idea of Shaheen being a vice presidential choice first came into my mind on the night of Clinton and Gore's second inaugural. There was a party at the Willard Hotel. Both Shaheen and Gore were there. During that party Gore made several toasts to her. He toasted her to the sky! He was sticking close to her, walking around with her.... It was as if she were *prom queen.... That's when I started paying attention.*"
Lt. Governor **Kathleen Kennedy Townsend** Maryland	Democratic pollster **Celinda Lake**, who dropped Kennedy Townsend's name as a veep contender at a January 21, 1999, Sperling Breakfast, a monthly gathering of Washington reporters.	"I'd heard rumblings about her in Democratic circles, but I can't remember any specific mentions. My reasons for thinking of her are threefold. One, she's an outstanding leader with an excellent record in her state. Two, her family name and the principles her family stand for make her an icon for Democrats. And, three, she's one of the most viable females out there right now."
U.S. Senator **Richard Durbin** Illinois	**Morton Kondracke**, who mentioned Durbin as a possible Gore veep on Fox News's "Beltway Boys" on October 16, 1999.	"I am not permitted to tell you, but it came from a Gore source."

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joked, "There are some good Republicans out there, which is not something I would have known just from reading their FBI files." As the crowd laughed, Begala added, "You know, I mean—that was a joke, Your Honor." But Klayman, whose organization, Judicial Watch, had launched a $90 million civil lawsuit on behalf of the subjects of the files, deposed Begala shortly thereafter. As Bob Dole once said of Filegate itself, where's the outrage?

BEST GAFFER: George W. Bush committed a serious gaffe last week when he told *The New York Times* that he had not changed any of his views as a result of his campaign against John McCain and that he did not regret anything he had done to win the nomination. A gaffe, as Michael Kinsley once wrote in these pages, is when a politician says what he really believes. Bush's comments qualified as a gaffe because, rather than make an insincere and politically convenient apology to McCain, he volunteered his earnest conviction that he had been right all along. The ensuing scandal dominated campaign coverage for several days. Bush might have avoided such straits had he followed the example of Al Gore, who now speaks of McCain in purely reverential tones. The vice president recently told an Illinois audience that "John McCain was right.... The voice that John McCain made heard is a voice I want to honor in the remaining seven and a half months of this campaign." This just a few weeks after Gore lambasted McCain as a Bush clone. "Both [McCain] and Governor Bush are for taking away a woman's right to choose," Gore said at a moment when it appeared McCain might win the GOP nomination, adding that "neither had the guts to speak out against the Confederate flag ... both are in the hip pocket of the NRA." But Gore's comically abrupt turnaround, unlike Bush's stubborn consistency, does not qualify as a gaffe. And reporters wonder why straight-talking politicians are so rare.

McCAIN SUCK-UP WATCH, CONT'D: Just because W. isn't doing it, that hasn't stopped other Republicans. This week's most flagrantly hypocritical attempt to mend fences with the Arizona senator:

"Senator McCain is one of our brothers."

—Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, shortly after Republican senators welcomed John McCain back to the Senate with a standing ovation at their weekly lunch on March 21. ■

VINT'S WEEK

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China can't follow Taiwan.

Centerfold

By IAN BURUMA

THE FREEDOM OF 22 million Chinese people to choose their own president is surely cause for celebration, especially since in so doing they have ended a half-century of one-party rule. And yet the democracy flourishing in Taiwan has been greeted in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world with a certain pique, and even with hostility. In the case of the People's Republic, this is easy to explain. Democracy never pleases dictators, particularly when it breaks out in a nation they claim as their own. But Singapore's leaders don't much like it, either. A real democracy on Chinese soil makes their assertion that authoritarian government is the "natural" Asian way look faintly ridiculous.

Mainland Chinese dissidents, on the other hand, see Taiwan as a model. If Chinese people in Taiwan can do it, why not Chinese people elsewhere? There is a certain logic to this. If the Taiwanese experiment with democracy proves anything, it is that political freedom is not something only Westerners can enjoy. But the fact that Chinese people can establish a democracy doesn't necessarily mean that people in China will. One must, of course, hope that Beijing copies Taipei. But there are good reasons to doubt it.

One reason is the relative lack of American clout in China, compared with Taiwan. When the Taiwanese government dragged its feet on human rights and political liberties in the 1980s, Washington could make it budge, since Taipei was entirely dependent on U.S. protection. The same, alas, is not true in mainland China. ("U.S. imperialism" has its uses.)

A more profound reason lies in the difference between Taiwanese nationalism and the traditional Chinese variety. Throughout recorded history, China has had a "Middle Kingdom" complex. Chinese rulers, as well as their critics, have assumed that China was the center of the universe. They saw "China" as a cultural and religious concept, not simply a political one. Thus, a stable political order reflected a natural, cosmic order. Rulers accused rebels of upsetting this cosmic order and bringing chaos to China. Rebels, for their part, claimed that by overthrowing an unpopular ruler they were "saving" China, thus reestablishing the cosmic balance with themselves as the new central power. This is not a good basis for democratic change, since the point is not to limit central power, just to replace it. The result has been an endless cycle of tyrannies, rebellions, and new tyrannies. Today's Chinese Communist Party still sees itself as the guardian of order, and it accuses democratic dissidents of being anti-Chinese.

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TAIWAN HAS ESCAPED this cycle because Taiwanese nationalism is deliberately not Chinese. The majority of the island's people see themselves as "native Taiwanese." Their ancestors arrived from the Chinese mainland 300 years ago. They vastly outnumber the so-called mainlanders, who came in the late '40s with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, his ragtag army, his Kuomintang (KMT) party, and his vain dreams of reconquering China from the "Communist bandits."

Since 1949, the KMT has ruled Taiwan, and, despite last week's election, it still dominates the island's parliament and armed forces. That is to say, a party of about 1.5 million mainlanders who dreamed of "saving" China imposed itself for 50 years on about 19 million "native Taiwanese," who had no interest in saving China. Indeed, they actively opposed the idea. Taiwanese nationalists wanted only a free and independent Taiwan. In the first three decades of KMT rule, this usually landed them in prison or got them killed. During the '80s, things loosened up, because the KMT realized that it could only continue governing Taiwan with the consent of the Taiwanese majority.

So the KMT brought indigenous Taiwanese—most notably President Lee Teng-hui—into the party. The "Taiwanization" of Taiwanese politics produced a rather obsessive "blood and soil" nationalism on the island, with much agonizing about Taiwan's distinct "identity" and "national soul"—ideas too dangerous to express openly during the early years of KMT rule. But it also meant something more liberating. By freeing themselves from the ancient goal of saving China, the Taiwanese felt no obligation to hold the center. They could open themselves to Western or Japanese ideas without feeling threatened. And opposition to the ruling KMT could no longer convincingly be called "unpatriotic," since the dissidents' *patrie* was not China but Taiwan.

In Chinese history, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, freedom and independence have always meant freedom and independence from foreign powers. On the Chinese mainland this remains the case. The same students who rebelled against the Communist government in 1989 can today be rallied against "Japanese militarism" or "U.S. imperialism." On Taiwan, however, the people who called for national independence wanted to be free of both the Chinese Communists and the KMT dictatorship. In their minds, democracy and national independence were inextricably linked. As long as both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party called for a united China, the Taiwanese opposition had to support independence—for "one China" meant tyranny by either one authoritarian party or another.

In today's world of global corporations and supranational institutions, this commitment to national independence might seem old-fashioned. But it shows that, for democrats, nationalism can still be useful. The problem is that what works on the Chinese periphery will not work so easily in the center. Nationalism in Taiwan has brought democracy. But nationalism in China is as likely to bring yet another cycle of tyranny. ■

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Moscow Dispatch

Running for Cover

By Masha Gessen

Last Sunday afternoon, an aide to Grigory Yavlinsky, the perennial third in Russia's presidential contests, called to invite me to a presentation of her candidate's program the following day.

"I'll try to make it," I answered honestly. "But tomorrow morning the pretrial detention center is having an open house, and I'm not sure when I'll get out."

The caller let out a nervous giggle. "What a good idea for them to do that! Give us a chance to get acquainted with the place before we all end up there."

Just as they lauded former President Boris Yeltsin's willingness to subject himself to a popular vote in 1991 and 1996, Western leaders have pronounced themselves heartened by the March 26 election to choose his successor. Not by the character of the election—who could be heartened by that?—but by the mere fact of its existence. If Russian politics have democracy's form, the thinking goes, that will help foster democracy's content. In other words, let's pretend. But, a week before the vote, neither Yavlinsky's aide nor I saw any point in keeping up the pretense. And we didn't see much democratic content on Russia's horizon.

True, Acting President Vladimir Putin technically faces eleven other candidates. But, with the exception of Yavlinsky, each of them has all but conceded the race. From the start, Putin's biggest potential rival, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, kept a conspicuously low profile, apparently believing that Putin would reward his lack of enthusiasm once reelected. Fearing that they too might be left out in the cold, last week two other major political parties overcame a history of enmity with the administration and actually endorsed Putin. One was the Fatherland-All Russia movement, co-led by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, once deemed the favorite to succeed Yeltsin. The other was the pro-reform Union of Right Forces, led by Sergei Kiriyenko, another former prime minister.

Kiriyenko tried to cast his Putin endorsement as a bid to save Russia from the Communists. Putin will become president no matter what, Kiriyenko's logic went, but if he does not garner a simple majority on March 26, he will face a runoff, most likely with Zyuganov, and the Communists will reemerge as Russia's second-largest political force. If even Putin's biggest opponents don't consider the election a serious exercise, can you imagine how it's viewed by Russia's legendarily cynical voters?

Meanwhile, Yavlinsky, the one candidate who actually *wants* to campaign against Putin, has been hampered by government restrictions. The state TV channel recently banned a Yavlinsky ad that showed inmates speaking in a prison yard—a reference to threats to Russian freedom. The channel explained that "the commercial associates the Russian electorate with prison inmates, while this group represents just a small part of the voters" and that the ad uses "a phrase about law enforcement servicemen that falls under the criminal-code article prohibiting disrespect for state authorities." The phrase in question is roughly equivalent to the American term "the fuzz." What's more, the current Russian criminal code contains no provisions for prosecuting "disrespect for state authorities."

Putin doesn't seem to be taking the election all that seriously, either. He has pointedly refused to campaign, declining invitations to televised debates and forfeiting the TV advertising time to which he is legally entitled. He has also refused to reveal his platform or postelection plans. The message, his henchmen explain, is that the acting president wants to be judged based on his actions rather than his words. But there is another message: that Putin, a behind-the-scenes player thrust into the public eye, considers political campaigning beneath him and the electoral process a regrettable nuisance.

Indeed, there is mounting evidence that this is how he sees democracy itself. When asked by three journalists last week about his controversial proposal to replace Russia's 89 elected governors with appointed administrators, Putin explained, "While keeping the institution of elected governors, I, for one, think we have to consider the possibility of imposing sanctions against them. Like removing them."

To be sure, relations between Moscow and the regions do need better regulation—at present, regional law often contradicts federal law. But the remark illustrates a pattern of Putin's: He raises a legitimate problem and then proposes a blatantly authoritarian solution. He legitimately laments Russia's degeneration into "a weak state" and calls for resurrecting central authority—but by vastly increasing the military's budget and power. He notes that Chechnya is plagued by lawlessness and chaos, which it is, and then "solves" the problem by reducing the area to a swath of scorched earth.

Russia's first post-Yeltsin election, which observers long predicted would be a historic moment in the country's democratic evolution, has largely been a depressing bore. For a moment, though, the campaign showed a spark of life. With Putin's opponents either comatose or silenced, a movement arose calling on voters to protest the pseudo-elections by voting against *all* the candidates. Finally, a vote worth casting. But the Central Election Committee quickly threatened the campaigners, who, it said, had no right to agitate in favor of an unregistered candidate. After all, that would be undemocratic. ■

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Albuquerque Dispatch

Tokin' Reformer

By CHARLES DUHIGG

NEW MEXICO GOVERNOR Gary Johnson was giving a luncheon speech to a group of Rotarians. It was your typical political event—faded club flags, raffle announcements, balding white men in bad suits. Then Johnson started talking about drugs. "My support of drug legalization comes, in part, from the fact that I smoked marijuana in college and the fact that I never viewed it as being criminal," he declared. "What's the actual health impact of doing heroin? From what I understand, there's none."

A swift silence stilled the 100-plus people in the crowd. They had heard about this. Last summer, Johnson became the nation's highest elected official to advocate legalizing heroin and marijuana. Since then, he has warned students, "Watch out for the drunk boy at the party. But the one who's smoked marijuana just wants to put on the headsets and attack a bag of potato chips"—causing parents at a junior high school to seek a court injunction preventing the governor from speaking to their kids. At a Santa Fe junior high school, Johnson had told youngsters, "[T]he fact is that, in this room right here, a lot of you are going to do illegal drugs."

And now worried Rotarians were watching their luncheon turn into a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. I thought the crowd would start to boo. But it didn't. In fact, a few people broke into mischievous grins. Then guffaws came from the back of the room. Johnson was great entertainment—and that, it seems, is all New Mexico's voters want from their governor, no matter what kind of havoc he wreaks on their state.

When he first ran for governor in 1994, Johnson presented himself as a turquoise "Mr. Smith": a self-made millionaire who had never before held office challenging a three-time incumbent. He ran as a Republican but campaigned as the anti-politician, promising not to let the demands of the office deter him from participating in Iron Man Triathlons.

During his first term, Johnson governed precisely as promised: no problem was so complex that it didn't have a simple solution. Vouchers would correct the education crisis. Private prisons lightened the checkbook. Legalized gambling solved American Indians' woes. Johnson also showed no patience for the give-and-take of legislative negotiation, which meant that his squawking produced little in the way of law. All of Johnson's major initiatives either failed in the legislature or blew up after implementation; he vetoed more bills than any governor in state history. Yet this hardly dampened his reelection prospects. Quite the contrary: Johnson's goofy demeanor inoculated him from public backlash, and in 1998 he bested a well-financed challenger by one of the widest margins in state history.

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Then came drugs. Northern New Mexico has one of the highest rates of death from drug overdoses in the nation; the state as a whole suffers from a near plague of addictions. Johnson proposed to solve this by legalizing not only marijuana—which would be sold by private license, just like alcohol—but also heroin, which pharmacies would distribute to medically certified addicts. The benefits, Johnson argues, would be fewer overdoses, lower costs, and fewer crimes committed to support habits. "How many people died from the health consequences of doing alcohol?" Johnson quizzed the Rotarians. "One hundred fifty thousand. How many died from tobacco? Four hundred fifty thousand. From legal prescription drugs? One hundred thousand. How many died last year from cocaine and heroin? About three thousand. And no reported deaths from marijuana."

If that sounds like flimsy evidence, the rest of Johnson's argument isn't much sturdier. Mainly, he cites the Netherlands, where similar steps have been taken with favorable results—though most experts agree it's impossible to extrapolate that the same would happen here. But Johnson has no patience for such complications. "I've seen governors come and go," says Republican State Senator Billy McKibben, "and this one's attention span can be measured in nanoseconds."

THIS COMBINATION OF naïveté and impatience, though, is precisely what endears Johnson to voters. Outside his office one recent evening I encountered a Republican county chairman, a Hispanic couple from near the Mexican border, a woman who lost her daughter to a drunk driver, and some people who make pro-marijuana Christmas cards (featuring pictures of hemp plants festooned with ornaments). This group had strikingly little in common politically. Save for the card makers, all found Johnson's drug-legalization policy absurd. Yet all agreed he was a great guy and pledged to vote for him whenever they could. "I've got a brother who died on the drugs, so, no, I don't think people should be able to have them," explained Hector Ybarra, one of the visitors. "But the governor, he's a really good man.... I voted for him because he seems like he'd be a friend. And this drug thing, you know, that's just his thing."

Of course, not everybody in New Mexico can afford to take the governor's actions so lightly. "The kids at school say the governor says it's OK to smoke pot and take the heroin," says Joe Mascareñas, an undersheriff in northern New Mexico. "I think this governor's opinions are going to kill more people." And it's not just drugs: Johnson's other vaunted solutions don't seem to be doing much good, either. The expansion of private prisons not only has yet to show substantial savings, it's contributed to more riots. The schools are still a mess—one organization recently ranked New Mexico the worst state in the nation in which to raise a child—yet Johnson's refusal to "back off" on vouchers has frozen the debate over education reform. And Indian-run gambling has been a legal morass ever since the state Supreme Court ruled Johnson's unilateral compacts illegal. Johnson always pledged to remain true to himself. Elective office, he proclaimed, would not change him one bit. Unfortunately for New Mexico, he has been true to his word. ■

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The man who placed truth over justice.

Starr Search

By Benjamin Wittes

Toward the end of his talk on Watergate, the lecturer turns to the independent counsel law, and his tone changes. What had been a jovial, informal address to a small group of students at George Washington University becomes impassioned as the speaker attacks the now-defunct law as a "profoundly misguided" response to the scandal. It promised "that there would be a process that was utterly devoid of and divorced from politics." Yet, as Kenneth Starr's experience showed us, the lecturer explains, it fails when the stakes are highest. "There was real power and insight at the founding of the American republic, when Mr. Madison and others [were] thinking very hard about structures," he concludes. "The independent counsel [law]—noble experiment—was a very useful demonstration to us that you need structures that are compatible with the original design at the Founding."

The lecturer can speak with authority about Starr's experience because he is none other than Starr himself. And, while it may seem hypocritical, this is what Starr has actually thought about the independent counsel law all along. Serving in the Justice Department during the early '80s, long before he signed on to investigate Whitewater, Starr helped formulate the Reagan administration's argument against reauthorizing the law. As a judge, he watched in dismay as the Supreme Court overwhelmingly upheld it in 1988. Even while serving as independent counsel, he urged Congress to kill the statute—because he feared that it encroached upon the executive branch's power and thereby left the independent counsel unaccountable and open to attack.

Yet, in Starr's mind, there is no disconnect between his view of the institution of the independent counsel and the way he investigated President Clinton. Indeed, he believes that his sensitivity to the law's dangers helped make him an appropriate person to take over the Whitewater investigation in the first place. His goal, he says later, was "that we maintain balance, that we maintain perspective, that we would not go to the ends of the earth . . . that we would exercise, as best we could, prudent judgment while being aggressive." Although it directly contradicts the judgment of his many critics, Starr believes he did just that.

In the living room of his modest suburban home, Starr is sitting in an armchair on his immaculate white carpeting. A book of patriotic songs rests on the piano, and the family dog, whose name is Oliver but whom Starr sometimes calls "Sweetheart," is off in a different room. Starr is explaining his vision of the role of the independent counsel, as we finish a series of interviews we began two months earlier.

You have to give him credit. Not many public figures would submit to nine hours of on-the-record cross-examination by a journalist who professed disagreement with key moves he made in office. Starr believes that he (like the president) should be held accountable for his actions. He also wants, even needs, to explain himself publicly. Though his office's dealings with the press during the Monica Lewinsky investigation drew fire, Starr thinks his failure to adequately justify his investigation to the public was one of his gravest errors. So when I approached him a few days after he stepped down as independent counsel and asked him to let me interrogate him about his conduct in office, he consented without hesitation.

Talking to Starr certainly convinced me of one thing: The media's crude caricatures of him are nonsense. To his critics, Starr symbolizes all that is intrusive and prurient in our scandal-soaked culture. A competing but equally hostile account promoted in a new book by Jeffrey Toobin sees Starr as an inept careerist who became the tool of a demonic (and simultaneously incompetent) staff. Meanwhile, Starr's defenders have all but canonized him, making him into an emblem of virtue and the rule of law in a society that has embraced situational ethics at the expense of truth. Any excesses, his defenders contend, were not Starr's fault but the inevitable outgrowth of a job that had no constitutional right to exist.

None of these descriptions suffice. The evidence that Starr was motivated by politics is incredibly weak. But the argument made by Starr and his defenders—that the whole problem was the statute—is not entirely persuasive, either. In truth, Starr interpreted the law in ways that magnified its problems. He did this, I believe, not because he was desperate to bring down the president but because of a deep-seated feature of his own character: Starr cares a great deal about truth—seemingly more than he cares about justice. And, although this is a generally laudable trait, it is not one you want animating a prosecutor with the resources Starr had at his disposal. Starr's understanding of the job of independent counsel turned it from a tool for investigating and punishing crimes committed by senior government officials into a grand search for the truth. By reading the law this way, Starr, with the noblest of intentions, turned the broad discretion the statute gave him into a straitjacket and helped realize the very dangers he had long feared.

Starr came to Washington at the beginning of the Reagan administration, as chief of staff to then-Attorney General William French Smith. Those were heady days for conservatives, when the rehabilitation of traditional executive powers was a cause all its own. For executive-power enthusiasts, the independent counsel law was a particularly sore spot. By giving judges the authority to appoint prosecutors, conservatives like Starr argued, the law deprived the president—through the attorney general—of power over a core function of the executive branch: the investigation and prosecution of crimes. Moreover, it created a prosecutor whom the president could not easily dismiss.

By the time the law was challenged, Starr was a judge. He was not among those hearing the case that eventually

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worked its way to the Supreme Court as *Morrison* v. *Olson*. But he followed it with interest. And he was distressed when the Supreme Court ultimately upheld it, particularly since Chief Justice William Rehnquist—whom Starr had long regarded as a kindred spirit on executive-power questions—wrote the opinion. Rehnquist argued that the encroachment on executive power was not a big enough deal to render the statute defective, but Starr says he knew that the law's theft of presidential powers "could at any moment prove to be an enormous deal when it goes to a high-visibility investigation of the president himself."

It was this very problem that Starr had in mind when he took over the investigation of Clinton. Starr knew that past independent counsels—because their entire job consisted of investigating one crime and because they didn't face the trade-offs in time and money that other federal prosecutors did—had often lost perspective. So Starr says he tried to create in his independent counsel's office a "microcosm of the Justice Department." He established what he describes as an elaborate pre-indictment review to ensure that the independent counsel's office was not subjecting its targets to a different standard of justice than that employed by normal federal prosecutors. He also tried to staff his investigation with people whose backgrounds reflected the experience and concerns of Justice Department prosecutors. Though Starr's staff has been much criticized, he describes his prosecutors as models of professionalism. His idea was that by re-creating the department's decision-making process, he could build into his office the perspective and concern for other governmental interests that past independent counsels had lacked.

Starr's strategy was reasonable as far as it went, but it was surprisingly minimal for a man who believed the law to be as dangerous as Starr says he did. One might have expected Starr to interpret the law itself in ways that lessened its impact and intrusiveness. But, paradoxically, the same separation-of-powers purism that made Starr so hostile to the law also committed him (in his own mind, anyway) to enforcing it rigorously. No matter how much he disagreed with it, he says, "I respected the Supreme Court's resolution of the issue and the fact that it was so overwhelming and that the voice of the Court was the voice of the chief justice." Trouble is, the independent counsel law was so poorly written that it inevitably required quasi-legislative interpretations from the special prosecutors serving under it. Starr explains his interpretations as disinterested readings of congressional will, but they were choices—choices that tended to push his investigation toward greater aggressiveness.

THE INDEPENDENT COUNSEL law has a tension embedded within it: Is the independent counsel a prosecutor like any other, or is he a one-man truth commission? On one hand, Congress required that the independent counsel follow the Justice Department's policies and procedures, and it has indicated that independent counsels are not to hold the subjects of their probes to standards tougher than those faced by subjects of normal criminal investigations. But, while asking independent counsels to act like normal prosecutors, Congress didn't place on them the restraints that make normal prosecutors act the way they do. Why would Congress give an independent counsel unlimited time and resources and ask him to write a report if it didn't believe he should do everything in his power to discover the truth?

In Starr's view, there's no question which role should dominate: The independent counsel is a truth seeker. "While the independent counsel is to follow Justice Department practice and procedure," Starr says, "I think the independent counsel uniquely has an obligation to get to the bottom as best he or she can of the matters that have been entrusted to him." To further explain, Starr suggests an analogy: the independent counsel is like a prosecutor asked to investigate something so important that it's worth diverting resources from other priorities. The message from Congress, he says, was that "you all are to go out here and get the dadgum facts. It's not important to the public welfare whether you secure convictions or not." In dealing with defense lawyers, he says, "I was quite consistent throughout the investigation. My goal, above all, is to gather the facts. I want the truth, and then along the way to be just and to be fair."

This is not the view shared by most former prosecutors and independent counsel alumni. I put Starr's interpretation to John Q. Barrett, who served under Iran-Contra investigator Lawrence Walsh and now teaches at St. John's University School of Law. He called it a "bad—almost a crazy bad—reading of the law." Alexia Morrison, whose investigation of former Assistant Attorney General Theodore Olson led to the Supreme Court litigation in which the independent counsel statute was upheld, says she does not "agree with—or even understand the basis for—the truth-commission view." Ronald Noble, the former head of the Treasury Department's law enforcement agencies and a former prosecutor, says Starr's view "is simply radically different from the view of most experienced prosecutors."

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM with Starr's vision is that it creates an incentive structure under which a prosecutor has no reason to stop asking questions or issuing subpoenas. As Columbia Law School Professor Gerard Lynch explains, the coercive tools available to prosecutors were not designed to accomplish generalized oversight interests. "Journalists naturally want the 'whole story,' as do historians, sociologists, [and] the public. But the criminal process is designed to decide whether an individual, at a particular moment in time, violated a very specific social norm without qualifying for any of a limited number of particular defenses, and subject to a standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt," Lynch says. "To confuse the power to prosecute for crimes with the power to broadly investigate malfeasance in office is terribly dangerous." Building a microcosm of the Justice Department doesn't do much good if you ask that microcosm to pursue a goal to which the Justice Department itself would never aspire.

Indeed, while Starr maintains that he took only traditional prosecutorial steps, he concedes that his probe's nonprosecutorial ambitions affected how he used his powers. Why indict Susan McDougal for criminal contempt of court after successfully prosecuting her once before and then—when she

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refused to testify before his grand jury—having her jailed for civil contempt? It was, in Starr's mind, an effort to get her to talk: "Here I was absolutely determined to do everything that I could to get the truth about the core of this investigation."

More fatefully, a prosecutor narrowly interested in what cases he could plausibly bring need not have waited so many months to cut an immunity deal with Monica Lewinsky. While Starr may have had good reason not to do business with Lewinsky's first attorney, the erratic William Ginsburg (whose shenanigans made him highly unreliable), that doesn't mean Starr had to tolerate a long stalemate with his chief witness. He could simply have put her in front of the grand jury and then sought an immunity order from the court if she asserted her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Starr says he considered and ultimately rejected this option because having Lewinsky testify in a coercive—rather than cooperative—atmosphere might have compromised the search for truth: "We were fearful, especially given the representation [by Ginsburg], that we would, perhaps, be buying into a situation of less-than-complete truth and candor, which would be most unfortunate."

To place all the blame for Starr's failure to quickly secure Lewinsky's testimony on his obsession with truth would be an overstatement. Starr is cautious by nature, and he notes, reasonably, that any investigation of the president must be rigorous. Starr also argues that the Lewinsky case's peculiar circumstances—which included Clinton's adamant denial of wrongdoing combined with a highly political atmosphere and the president's public promise and private refusal to cooperate with the probe—made it essential that the independent counsel get things right, regardless of his reading of the law. But Starr's need to know the truth certainly contributed to the long standoff between his office and Lewinsky. And this, in turn, created a situation in which getting the truth required Starr to take the very steps—steps like calling so many of Lewinsky's friends before the grand jury—for which he was accused of excess.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF Starr's behavior is even more difficult to square with his belief in the separation of powers. Given his concern for executive power, one might have expected Starr to go out of his way to avoid doing the legislative branch's work—that is, to avoid doing an impeachment investigation. Starr did almost the opposite. He believes that his referral to Congress—widely criticized for its sexual explicitness and its seeming advocacy of impeachment—was exactly the kind of report the law specifies when it commands that "an independent counsel shall advise the House of Representatives of any substantial and credible information ... that may constitute grounds for an impeachment."

"I made a judgment—and I accept responsibility for it—that the statute ... asks for judgment to be made," Starr explains. "I just felt that ... the idea of 'grounds,' coupled with the 'substantial and credible,' put a burden on me ... to present the information, to suggest this was a serious matter in terms of grounds. And I really dwelled on that word 'grounds'—that I needed to justify this. I needed to justify in the sense of 'Here are the reasons why we believe that this information may constitute grounds for the removal of the president of the United States.'"

THIS IS QUITE a stretch. The evidentiary threshold required for an independent counsel's referral actually seems very low. "Substantial and credible" describes a standard far lower than such in-court standards as "preponderance of the evidence" or "clear and convincing evidence." For that matter, the word "information" seems like something less than "evidence." And the words "may constitute" suggest that the independent counsel need not even believe that Congress should impeach—merely that it might consider doing so. If Starr had read the law differently—in, arguably, a way more faithful to the statute's purpose—he could have produced a much quicker referral with a minimum of commentary and detail, all designed to avoid intruding on Congress's sole power under the Constitution to conduct impeachments. Congress could then have conducted its own investigation into as many or as few of the gory details as it desired, with Starr restricting himself to the rather narrow criminal questions the Lewinsky case posed.

The consequences of Starr's decision to do the legislature's work were enormous. For one thing, congressional investigators would never have asked witnesses the questions that Starr's prosecutors asked in the privacy of a grand jury room. (Can you imagine House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, on C-SPAN, asking Lewinsky about the cigar incident?) Starr could do so because he had no political accountability for his questions, despite the fact that they were ultimately being asked in the service of the congressional impeachment power. When Congress then turned around and released large amounts of grand jury material, the privacy invasion was horrific. By allowing himself to become, in effect, a congressional investigator, Starr relieved Congress of political responsibility for deciding what incremental questions to ask. All Congress had to do was discuss and then vote on whether the prepackaged results of his probe warranted Clinton's impeachment.

Under a more modest reading of the law—one that didn't envision the office of the independent counsel as a truth commission bound to do Congress's dirty work—Starr could have maintained a comparatively minimal presence. He could have, after receiving jurisdiction, brought key witnesses quickly before the grand jury—with or without immunity agreements. Then he could have decided whether to pursue criminal cases, and he could have sent the information to Congress in a completely neutral fashion. The price of such a reading would, to be sure, have been a less thorough investigation—as well as the likelihood that any active congressional investigation would have made later criminal prosecution impossible. But this approach would have solved the problem that troubled so many—it would have made Congress politically accountable for the investigation that led to Clinton's impeachment.

Even some of Starr's former staff now acknowledge that a quick referral would have been preferable. Says Stephen Bates, one of the principal authors of Starr's report, "It would have been far better for us, especially for Ken, if we had trans-

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mitted evidence much earlier and the spotlight had shifted to Congress. But a lot of the initial evidence was murky or circumstantial, and Congress certainly wasn't demanding that we hand it over. So we ended up spending months litigating frivolous privileges and persuading Monica Lewinsky to cooperate." Starr, though, remains convinced that he merely did what he was supposed to. "There was nothing to prevent the Congress, if it saw fit, from stepping in," he argues. But "there was also nothing to prevent the Congress in the exercise of its unfettered constitutional discretion to decide to defer." The bottom line is that "Congress has made this judgment, without a lot of thought, without a lot of care, to have this weighty duty imposed on an independent counsel," he says. "I may not like it, but that's the job description.... And I cannot, in effect, say this is unconstitutional as applied. I have a duty as an executive officer ... to seek faithfully to uphold the statute."

Starr has acknowledged certain errors—even some major ones. He now says that by allowing himself to become the independent counsel not only for Whitewater but for the White House travel-office scandal, the FBI files matter, and the Lewinsky affair, he slowed his progress and created an appearance that he was Clinton's personal prosecutor. But he denies that his reading of the law led him to excess. "I think, at every turn, we took highly professional steps that actually represented the judgment that we must gather the facts while taking into account whether we were, in fact, trenching unduly on other important public interests," he says.

Starr contrasts his own performance in this regard with that of a man named Whitney North Seymour Jr., who is to Starr what Starr is to so many others: the quintessential out-of-control independent counsel. Seymour was the special prosecutor who in 1987, during a prosecution of former Reagan aide Michael Deaver, touched off an international incident by attempting to subpoena then-Canadian Ambassador Allan Gotlieb. Starr says he saw "a monomaniacal quality to this determination to get the facts, no matter what"—and then adds jokingly, "Sound familiar?" As he later explains, the problem with Seymour's action was that his "interest in gathering the facts had come up against a clear problem of international relations, diplomatic relations, matters of international comity, and some fairly well-established views with respect to diplomatic immunity." Starr insists that, whatever his critics may say, he never ignored competing public interests in pursuing his investigation.

"Let me come to what I think could be viewed by reasonable persons as our vulnerable point in that respect—namely the Secret Service [subpoenas]." Like Seymour, Starr had demanded this testimony against the will of the rest of the executive branch, which had protested that another significant public interest was at stake: the safety of the president. But Starr says that, even here, he was reasonable. "I calibrated, I negotiated, I talked" in an effort to accommodate the executive branch, he says. And, unlike the Reagan administration, which insisted on respecting the well-established doctrine of diplomatic immunity, he adds, the Secret Service was acting contrary to its own history of providing information regarding criminal probes involving the president.

But, though Starr is correct that his move was more justifiable than Seymour's, he still overruled the executive branch's considered judgment—a peculiar position for someone so vocally devoted to respecting other government interests. Is the ultimate difference between Starr and Seymour, I ask, simply that Starr believes he was right? In response, Starr falls back on the same argument he makes every time the Secret Service episode comes up. He says he had certain information—information he still cannot disclose and, indeed, will never disclose—that proves the effort to prevent the agents' testimony was all a political game. "I'm handicapped again in my own defense here by virtue of what I viewed as a problem in terms of the reasons that the Secret Service was not doing what I knew it had historically done," he says. Starr, in other words, won't say what the ultimate difference is between himself and a man whose investigation he calls "monomaniacal." Instead, he wants you to trust him. He was, after all, merely after the truth. ■

Why are Gore's potential running mates so lame?

Party of One

By WILLIAM SALETAN

THE WEEKEND AFTER Vice President Al Gore wrapped up the Democratic presidential nomination, pundits placed their bets on who his running mate would be. "He's got three strong choices," said George Stephanopoulos on ABC's "This Week." "George Mitchell, a former Senate majority leader; Bill Cohen, a secretary of defense, a moderate Republican; [and] the other independent governor besides Jesse Ventura ... Angus King, governor of Maine." Stephanopoulos's colleagues razzed him for naming three guys from Maine. They overlooked something far more peculiar. Here was the strategist who had supposedly helped Bill Clinton revitalize the Democratic Party. And, of the three running mates he had thought of for Gore, not one was a Democrat who had held office in the past five years.

How has a presidency widely praised for restoring faith in

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Strong stuff

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the Democratic Party produced such a wasteland of potential Democratic vice presidents? The menu of useful Republican running mates for George W. Bush is ample and diverse: former Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell, Arizona Senator John McCain, a McCain-like senator such as Fred Thompson of Tennessee or Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a woman such as Elizabeth Dole, or a big-state "reform" governor such as Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania or Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin. But try drawing up a menu of running mates for Gore, and you quickly realize that the Democratic kitchen is empty.

What happened to all the food? Clinton ate it. He turned the Democratic Party into his private political machine, absorbing each good idea and the credit that went with it. This is Gore's perverse inheritance: a popular presidential record, a united party, and nowhere to turn for help.

Eight years ago, when Clinton first ran for president, he had plenty of Democratic leaders from which to choose a running mate: Gore, Indiana Representative Lee Hamilton, Georgia Senator Sam Nunn, Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey, New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, Pennsylvania Senator Harris Wofford, New York Governor Mario Cuomo, and Texas Governor Ann Richards, among others. What happened to them? They were decimated by the 1994 backlash against the ambitious agenda of Clinton's first two years—his deficit-closing tax increase, his gun-control measures, and his clumsy proposal for universal health insurance. Richards lost her job to George W. Bush. Cuomo lost his to George Pataki, now a possible Bush running mate. The governors of big states are still viewed as good candidates for president or vice president. But now those governors are Republicans.

Many congressional Democrats, including Wofford and then-House Speaker Tom Foley, also lost their seats that year. Rising stars, such as Representative Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, were killed off in bids for the Senate. Those who survived lost their platforms. Relegated to the minority and stripped of their chairmanships, they forfeited their influence, surrendered the limelight, and disappeared from view. Nunn and Bradley retired from Congress. Hamilton and Kerrey drifted into the shadows. The surviving governors also disappeared. Governor Jim Hunt of North Carolina might be a good running mate for Gore because of his expertise in education. But Hunt isn't nationally known like GOP Governors Pataki, Ridge, Thompson, John Engler, and Christie Whitman. The national press has lavished attention on the Republican statehouse innovators, but there haven't been enough Democrats to tie together in any coherent theme. Nobody talks about "the Democratic governors," because, since 1994, there haven't been many to talk about.

EVEN IF CLINTON isn't responsible for the way his party was destroyed, he is surely responsible for the way it has been rebuilt. He retreated into his castle and raised the drawbridge over the moat, leaving his troops to die outside. "The Constitution gives me relevance," he told the media during the darkest hour of the Republican siege, the day before the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. "The president is relevant here." To make himself relevant again, Clinton made every other Democratic objective irrelevant. He reduced his party to one mission: keeping the White House. Through Dick Morris's strategy of "triangulation"—portraying congressional Democrats and Republicans as extremists in order to make himself look moderate—Clinton inflicted two diseases on his party. He blurred ideological differences among Democrats in Congress, reinforcing the crude impression that they were all too liberal. And he defined Democrats as the party of the presidency.

Nine years ago, when the Democrats controlled Congress and the Republicans held the White House, Christopher Matthews argued in these pages that Democrats had become the tender "Mommy Party," while Republicans were the tough "Daddy Party." Voters liked having a stern Republican president to rein in an indulgent Democratic Congress, and vice versa. After the Democrats lost Congress in 1994, Clinton turned the metaphor on its head. He repackaged himself as the nice Mommy President who would protect voters from the mean Daddy Congress. "If Newt Gingrich controls Congress and his partner, Bob Dole, enters the Oval Office, there'll be nobody there to stop them," warned a Clinton reelection ad in 1996.

By basing his reelection campaign on the argument that the executive and legislative branches should be divided between the parties, Clinton doomed the Democrats to the congressional minority. As long as Mommy was president, Daddy had to stay in Congress. Sure enough, two months after Clinton's Mommy/Daddy ad, the National Republican Congressional Committee replied with its own. "What would happen if the Democrats controlled Congress *and* the White House?" asked the ad. "If we give the special interests a blank check in Congress, who's going to represent *us*?"

That argument prevented Democrats from recapturing the House in 1996, and it has kept them out of power since. While Clinton and Gore have flourished, Democrats in Congress have starved. Compare the Clinton-Gore succession with the Reagan-Bush succession. Reagan ran on an ideological agenda to which his GOP colleagues could hitch their wagons. This helped Republicans control the Senate and pass legislation with Democratic support in the House for six years. When it came time for Bush to pick a running mate, he had many accomplished, well-known Republican senators to choose from—Dole, John Danforth of Missouri, Bill Armstrong of Colorado, Pete Domenici of New Mexico, and Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas, among others—as well as Representative Jack Kemp of New York. (Bush bravely spurned them all to prove that he could run—and win—with an idiot.) Gore's options are much weaker, because Clinton's triangulation and Mommy/Daddy jujitsu have stunted his party's growth in Congress.

YOU CAN ARGUE that all this was necessary—that Clinton had to save himself in order to save the party. But there's no way to rationalize two additional decisions that perpetuated the Democrats' congressional exile. In 1996, facing near-certain reelection, Clinton padded his victory margin by sucking up so much soft money from Democratic donors that some Democratic candidates further down the ballot

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couldn't raise enough cash for their own races. Then, in 1998, he dragged his allies through a sex and perjury scandal that tainted the Democratic Party, consumed the nation's political attention, and buried the issues on which the Democrats had hoped to retake the House. If the Democrats controlled Congress today, their Senate leader, Tom Daschle, would be shepherding important legislation, and pundits would be talking him up as a potential vice president. Instead, they're pining for George Mitchell.

Moreover, when a Democratic senator or representative does manage to pass a noteworthy bill, Clinton gets the credit. While the bill is in Congress, Clinton goes to the Rose Garden and pounds the pulpit for it. After it passes, he holds a White House signing ceremony to expound on the good it will accomplish. The poor legislator who carried the ball stands in the background. Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman might be a more attractive vice presidential nominee if people knew about his efforts to curtail the marketing of media violence to children. Instead, they associate the issue with Clinton. Yes, Reagan hogged some credit this way, too. But, unlike Clinton, Reagan defined himself sharply, so that his personality didn't saturate every bill he signed. Reagan allowed Kemp and Phil Gramm to earn national reputations from the tax and budget cuts of the early '80s. Can you name the sponsors of the Democrats' 1993 budget legislation? Or do you know it only as the "Clinton-Gore economic plan"?

THEREIN LIES THE payoff. Everything that might have burnished the reputation of Gore's future running mate burnished Clinton's and Gore's reputations instead. Gore doesn't need to put Lieberman on his ticket to get credit for protecting kids from media violence, because he already gets the credit. He doesn't need to offer the vice presidency to California Senator Dianne Feinstein, because he has already handed out enough federal money at enough photo-ops in California to win the state. Nor is it just a matter of credit. Clinton's appropriation of every potent issue and popular initiative has broadened his appeal across the spectrum. Liberals love his calls for a prescription-drug benefit and a higher minimum wage. Moderates love his promises to hire new cops and pay down the national debt. Gore doesn't need to "balance" his ticket with a liberal or a moderate, because he *is* a liberal and a moderate. Clinton's shrewd, hungry, self-centered presidency has crammed the entire Democratic agenda into one administration and one heir.

To put the virtues of this strategy into perspective, compare Gore's situation with that of George W. Bush. It's true that John McCain could help the Republican ticket far more than Bill Bradley could help the Democratic ticket. But that bodes well for the Democrats, not the Republicans. McCain is useful because he can supply what Bush lacks: the ability to attract independent and Democratic voters. The reason Bradley can't similarly help Gore is that Gore doesn't need help. This is the real story of the primaries. McCain found a constituency Bush couldn't reach. Bradley failed to find a constituency Gore couldn't reach. Bush now needs a running mate to round out his appeal. Gore doesn't.

Now compare Gore's situation with that of Vice President Bush in 1988. Bush had a more formidable list of potential running mates, starting with Kemp and Dole. But why were Kemp and Dole formidable? Because they had fought Bush for the presidential nomination. And why had they fought him? Because he was weak. They had seized an opening on Bush's right. If House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt or Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone had run for the Democratic presidential nomination this year, they might have become equally formidable running mates for Gore. But they didn't run, because they saw no opening on Gore's left. Bradley plunged in, hoping to find that opening. Instead, he found that Gore had the bases covered.

From this perspective, the chatter about Bill Cohen and Angus King as possible running mates for Gore is a testament to the vice president's political health: Gore has such broad support in his own party that he could conceivably raid the GOP for his vice presidential selection without prompting charges of disloyalty. It's equally auspicious that many Democrats under discussion for veep, such as Governor Gray Davis of California and Senator Bob Graham of Florida, are criticized as boring technocrats. Gore is free to pick a boring technocrat because this year the Democrats don't need flash. Voters aren't clamoring for change. They're happy with the way Clinton and Gore are running the country. They don't care whether Gore picks a charismatic running mate—as long as he reappoints Alan Greenspan.

The clearest reflection of Gore's promise and predicament is the current boomlet for Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana. Bayh is young, moderate, and practical—a New Democrat who wins in a Republican state. The rap against him is that he's a "clone" of Gore. But that's what people said about Gore when Clinton picked him. Cloning is what a presidential candidate does when he's got it all: the right message, temperament, and background for the political moment. If you're perfect, your best move is to copy yourself. That's why Clinton picked Gore and why Gore may well pick Bayh.

BUT CLONING CARRIES a price. It puts all the party's eggs in one basket—or, to follow the metaphor more literally, it puts all the party's genes in one egg. The reason nature reproduces human beings through sex and genetic variation instead of cloning is that none of us has it all. Each of us has a flaw. If you clone a species from yourself, the entire species has your flaw. If you clone a political party from yourself, the whole party has your flaw. Diversity averts this scenario. A genetically diverse species can survive a crisis to which some of its members can't adapt. A politically diverse party can survive a challenge to which some of its leaders can't respond. A party of clones, on the other hand, can be exterminated in a stroke. This is the danger of Clinton's narcissistic presidency. A Democratic Party synonymous with Clinton and Gore will be wiped out when Clinton and Gore meet a big problem they can't solve.

Already the list of potential Gore running mates bears ominous signs of inbreeding. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson is being widely touted. Housing Secretary Andrew Cuomo, former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, and

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former Budget Director Frank Raines have also been suggested. Three of these men have never held elective office; the fourth did so without distinction. The reason they're on the list is that they've worked in the Clinton administration, and the Clinton administration is the only Democratic show in town. There's even talk about Hillary Clinton succeeding Gore, literally keeping the presidency in the family. Sensible people say she won't try it. But sensible people said she wouldn't run for the Senate from New York, either.

This can't go on. No party can survive, much less grow, on such a narrow institutional base. It must diversify or die. Yes, President Clinton deserves credit for moving the Democratic Party back to the center. Yes, he deserves thanks for restoring public confidence in Democratic control of the presidency. Yes, he deserves gratitude for breaking the siege of 1995 and turning back the Gingrich revolution. And, yes, he deserves praise for choosing a capable deputy and heir. But that entire legacy is at risk if Gore models his presidency after Clinton's. Perhaps it's true, as critics say, that Gore will never be the fluid, expansive, overarching figure Clinton was. For his party's sake, let's hope not. ■

That's the Ticket

LAST WEEK, I caused a stir in California Senator Barbara Boxer's office. Boxer hadn't been included on any lists of potential running mates for Al Gore. As vice presidential expert Joel Goldstein quips, "If every governor or senator is being mentioned and you're not, it's sort of embarrassing." But then the first Zogby poll of potential vice presidents zipped out of the fax machine, and there was Boxer—in fourth place! I informed the senator's staff. "I think it's very flattering," a Boxer aide gushed. "It's nice to see that we have fans out there." The senator herself broke into a big smile. So how did John Zogby choose the names on his list? "We made them up," he says. And why was Boxer included? "Our folks just thought there ought to be a woman."

Zogby's poll will probably be picked up by the insider political digest *The Hotline*. It could even get mentioned on CNBC's "Hardball" or spur an article in one of the California newspapers. And that just might spawn a Boxer boomlet. All of which reveals a central truth of the veep parlor game: Almost all its practitioners are either uninformed or self-interested—or both.

Vice presidential rumors come in three species. Boxer falls into the first category: the "interest group pander." Every list of potential Democratic veeps must include a woman, an African American, and this year, for the first time, a Hispanic (gays are still an election or two away). The names of representatives of such groups must be floated even if they have no real chance of making it onto the ticket. In fact, they must be floated *especially* if they have no real chance—because then the rumor itself serves as a kind of patronage. Now that soaring gas prices make Energy Secretary Bill Richardson a less plausible choice, other Hispanic names, like Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera, have emerged. "Let's be honest," says the University of Virginia's Larry Sabato, "every Democratic vice presidential list must have an African American on it." So the Gore campaign has leaked Fannie Mae Chairman Franklin Raines's name to *The Wall Street Journal*. And Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater is starting to pop up as well.

A less arbitrary but equally cynical species might be called the "inside job." Consultants inside the nominee's campaign push one of their other clients for veep in hopes of increasing their own power. The most frequently mentioned Democratic names all have good inside connections. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts has Boston-based strategist Michael Whouley, a senior Gore adviser who has been a consultant to the multimillionaire senator since 1982. Another oft-cited Gore running mate is North Carolina Senator John Edwards, elected two years ago with the help of media adviser Bob Shrum and pollster Harrison Hickman, both key Gore consultants. (Gore's famous ploy—demanding that Bill Bradley pull down his TV ads and enter a series of debates—was first hatched by Shrum during Edwards's 1998 Senate campaign.) And no one has pushed his man more aggressively than Bob Butterworth—Florida attorney general, Gore's Florida campaign chairman, and shameless flack for Senator Bob Graham. "Just on paper Bob Graham is one of the best-qualified people in the country to be vice president," says potential U.S. attorney general Butterworth.

But what about the would-be veep who either lacks powerful surrogates or doesn't trust them to do the job? Such a person falls into the final category, the "self-starter." "A very prominent candidate for vice president on Gore's ticket just happened to call me last week," Sabato says. Sabato had recently pontificated about why Gore might choose this person but had apparently left out some key details. Sabato says the candidate began their conversation by making it clear he wasn't interested in being vice president. "But I was really intrigued by what you said," Sabato recalls the candidate telling him, "about the fact that I could influence not only the people of my state but also the neighboring states of X and Y. I thought that was very perceptive. However, you left out the state of Z. You may not know this, but many of my campaign commercials have hit that state, and I have wide support in that state."

Dan Quayle did something similar in 1988. "I had tried, as subtly as I could," Quayle wrote in his memoir, "to make it clear I was both qualified and available." He jumped into high-profile Senate debates and made himself more accessible to the press. Which reminds some people of the way Indiana Senator Evan Bayh, who holds Quayle's old seat, has been acting lately. Bayh has been on the tube more often, and he recently introduced major education legislation, a subject that may be a big issue this fall. And could he be whispering in a few ears? A Bayh aide makes a suspiciously familiar case about the senator's popularity in the Midwest: "The Fort Wayne media market goes up into Michigan, and definitely into Ohio. The South Bend market goes up to Michigan. Of course, the Gary area is the Chicago market.... But then you have Evansville, which goes down south a little bit into Kentucky. And then you've got the Louisville market, which covers southern Indiana, too, but definitely [reaches] Ohio and Kentucky."

And yet, despite all that, Bayh still trails Boxer in the latest Zogby poll.

RYAN LIZZA

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

A Star, A Stupidity

EVERY ART HAS a mode in which it kicks off its shoes and lolls in its commonest denominators. In literature it's called a good read, in music it's sometimes openly called a *divertimento*. In film, at least among those who use the term "film" for the upper end of the cinema scale, it's called a movie. **Erin Brockovich** (Universal) is one such.

The matter isn't determined by flossy content. Almost every story element here is not flossy. Based on fact, this movie's central conflict could hardly be more grave: a legal fight against a huge corporation whose power plant is poisoning people. What makes it a movie is that it clearly strives to be one, a picture that wants us to expect only the most accessible emotions, which are ladled out in the large economy size and which include a warming finish. And—this is almost always the case—which does it all through the persona of an attractive star.

This star is Julia Roberts, who has committed some career flubs since she burst forth in *Pretty Woman* but who, especially after *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *Notting Hill*, has become a true star—a one-person universe within which a movie can find space and light. More: the makers have provided the essential doubleness of a movie. They have contrived a vehicle for their star that simultaneously makes us aware of the contrivance and makes us grateful that they did it. I don't know whether Susannah Grant's screenplay deviates from the original facts or how far the director, Steven Soderbergh, has beatified Erin. Maybe every millimeter, in action and aspect, is true: if so, credit to the makers for seeing that it was a ready-made movie. If it's gussied up, they have at least done it enjoyably.

It is the early 1990s. Erin, a California divorcée with three small children, is hard up and looking for a job. Her car is smashed by another car, and a lawyer named Ed Masry assures her that she has a good case. She loses. Vindictively she barges into Masry's office and demands that he give her a job to make up for his busted guarantee. (Rosalind Russell, Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, are you drooling up there?)

Erin has no legal training, and not much education of any kind; but she is smart. She finds files in Masry's office that suggest a utility company's responsibility for illnesses in families living near the plant. She visits some of these people, gets information, and badgers her boss, who admires her in a wary way, into doing battle with a $28 billion corporation. The woes and the setbacks are multiple, as are Erin's personal problems. (She develops a romance with a biker who lives across from her home and who takes care of her kids. Soon there's an inversion of the usual domestic problem: *she* is too busy to pay attention to *him*.) We know, and in this case are glad to know, how it is all going to end.

The screenplay has some gentle touches. For instance, the triumphant legal decision happens offscreen. Instead of the customary courtroom scene with the judge pronouncing and the crowd cheering, Erin and her boyfriend visit one of the chief sufferers and tell her quietly about her award. The small-scale climax has a large effect. But the screenplay also has some tatters. At one point in the long legal fight, Erin gets a threatening phone call, and absolutely nothing comes of it. At another point Erin is desperate to find some crucial documents and gets them through a lucky meeting in a bar.

Maybe these things actually did happen: if so, then life is imitating art even in California. Did Erin really wear very low-cut blouses and very mini skirts and very high heels while she was doing all this work? (The real Erin is briefly visible in the picture, but she appears as a coffee-shop waitress, so we can't tell.) I hope so; because it keeps the picture factual while it helps to give Roberts a sassy, sexy mind of her own. Is the real Erin so salty a talker? I hope so, because again the verity (if it is) helps to make her a free-swinging child of her times.

By now Roberts has demonstrated all that she knows about acting and all that she is likely to know. It's enough. She does not delve deeply into her range of feeling, but she does have some range. Aaron Eckhart is reticently macho as the biker who loves his freedom and her kids. As Ed Masry, Albert Finney, a walking definition of the word "actor," has one of his largest parts in American pictures. It is not a greatly demanding role—it is something like the newspaper boss that Ed Asner used to do on TV—but the screen bulges with Finney's pleasure in doing it well.

Soderbergh directed with a nice mixture of ease and drama. If he is no longer the fresh breeze that he promised to be, he has at least become reliable. There are some subtle moments, but they may be due to Anne V. Coates, the seventy-five-year-old editor. (She also edited the sprightly *Out of Sight* for Soderbergh.) The opening scene is in a doctor's office where Roberts, seated in the visitor's chair, is applying for a job—knowing that she is unqualified and trying to chat things along as she feels her chances waning. The camera holds on her through this opening. Then there is a shot of the doctor, unimpressed; then another of Roberts running out of steam; then a quick shot of the doctor, saying "Look—," and he is cut off. His dismissal of Roberts, which we don't need to hear, is condensed to one word as we swirl on into the story. The rhythm of this first sequence tickles, and that last quick shot of the doctor flips us into the film. (Sorry: into the movie.)

If the director of *Knife in the Water* (1962) could have seen **The Ninth Gate** (Artisan) back then, he would probably have snickered. If he was feeling generous. Both pictures are the work of Roman Polanski, whose disintegration continues. It hasn't been a steady decline: *Repulsion* and *Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby* were at least ingenious and engrossing. This latest piece is ludicrous.

First, we are asked to accept Johnny Depp as a connoisseur of antiquarian books. He slouches around in private-eye clichés, looking for clues and giving us none as to how he became so learned. Depp is engaged by a rich New York collector to track down three copies of a seventeenth-century rarity about the devil. The trail leads him past Lena Olin's loins—she is the widow of another rich collector—through Portugal and Paris, into an assortment of chateaux and dungeons. Depp is accompanied, more or less constantly, by a strange blonde who may be the devil herself (no gender prejudice here); she flies a bit and often appears unexpectedly at Depp's side. One sequence, perhaps shot before *Eyes Wide Shut*, is a satanic mass like the one in Kubrick's picture.

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The Ninth Gate is meant to be a thriller elevated by Polanski touches, his cherished trademark blend of evil and sex. It all comes out ridiculous and boring, because of Depp, because of the corny Gothic settings, because of the ill-jointed screenplay that Polanski, Enrique Urbizu, and John Brownjohn have derived from a novel by Arturo Perez-Reverte.

The blonde Mephistopheles is played by Emmanuelle Seigner without distinction. (We get many close-ups of her eyes, which are meant to convey her satanic self but don't.) Lena Olin was well-paid, I hope, for wasting her large talent in this nonexistent role. The most worrisome aspect of *The Ninth Gate* is that it was made by a man who, however low the level of his past work, was at least clever. This picture is stupid. ■

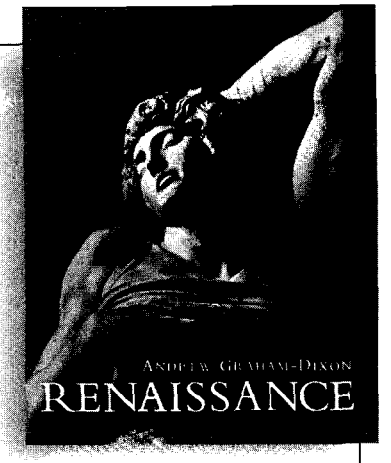
Mindy Aloff on Dance
Husbandry

THE PHRASE "Appalachian Spring" was conceived by Hart Crane, but most people today associate it with the ballet of that name by Martha Graham—who chose Crane's words for her title—and its music by Aaron Copland, who modestly called his score "Ballet for Martha." Although both the choreography and the music of **Appalachian Spring** are considered masterpieces of their respective arts, the beloved music is much better known, enjoying an independent life as a staple of the recording studio and the concert hall, where it is regularly programmed and performed with distinction. Indeed, some references ignore its theatrical premiere altogether and date its birth to its first audition in a purely musical context. Copland made two versions of the score: one for small orchestra, as it was played in October of 1944, when Graham and her company first danced to it, and one for enlarged orchestral forces, as it was first played by the New York Philharmonic in September 1945, in the company of works by Bach and Beethoven, on a program assembled to mark the end of World War II.

Although Copland's achievement certainly stands on its own, its character as a theatrical creation, in the service of a ballet, contributes to its wide appeal. The music suggests various actions and scenes, and its central melody—the traditional Quaker song "'Tis a gift to be simple"—lends an element of frontier aspiration that still stirs the heart. Copland knew that this beautiful song, directly presented, is a treasure, and he carefully prepares for the full statement of it as if he were presenting a great sea pearl. Sometimes, listening, I try to imagine how the tune would strike an audience that does not know the words ("'Tis a gift to be simple / 'Tis a gift to be free / 'Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be") and has no sense of their significance as Americana, learned by generations of grade-schoolers and sung by amateur choruses of all ages in contexts both secular and sacred. Its hymnlike quality, at least, would remain.

Graham's choreography gives that hymn a local habitation and a name: a nineteenth-century wedding of homesteaders and sanctification of the couple's newly built house, somewhere in the American interior. The dramatis personae consists of The Bride, The Husbandman (both young), The Pioneering Woman (an older maternal figure), a charismatic Revivalist preacher, The Followers—four girls in poke bonnets who daisy-chain themselves together. The "story" is spare: they enter, they celebrate, the couple dances together and each member dances for one another. The Bride performs several dance monologues anticipating the future (including fearful anticipations), The Revivalist delivers a fire-and-brimstone sermon on the future's perils, the wedding takes place, the visitors leave, and the couple are left alone in their house to face whatever the future may bring.

Well over half a century later, both the music and the dance have lost their wartime associations for the general public; their dark anxieties and tense optimism now seem entirely issues of composition and performance. It takes an act of imagination, and perhaps a little reading, to appreciate the extratheatrical plangency for original audiences of that Quaker song, with its implications of communal



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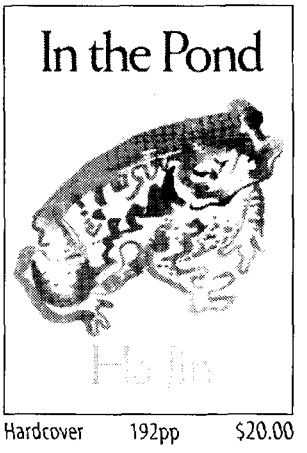

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salvation in unadorned faith, and of Graham's staging to it of a wedding and a house-raising in a frontier wilderness, witnessed only by an expanse of impassive sky, untilled land as far as the eye can envision, and a handful of celebrants—among them, a Preacher, who delivers a fire-and-brimstone sermon on the future's perils.

Both Copland and Graham discovered veins of joy, even ecstasy, in the subject of their collaboration; but these passages of emotional splendor are fireworks in a sobering context. There is nothing cozy about the young couple's prospects: as the Revivalist would have it, in the score and in the dance steps, they are on the verge of the purgatorial state about to be suffered, say, by the young couple entering into marriage at the end of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount." Without that darkness, the spring in "Appalachian Spring" has no significance, a point made by both the music and the dance.

And by the stage. Isamu Noguchi's landmark set—so charming in its design, so horrifying in its practical applications—consistently reminds us of how vulnerable the characters are, and of the discomforts in store for them: the skeletal outline and one clapboard exterior wall of a newly built house, which clinically, even mercilessly, exposes the interior to the audience; a small swatch of open fencing, which wouldn't keep a single cow from wandering off or a single intruder from crashing in; a rude bench by the wall, perfectly fashioned for an individual to grieve or repent at leisure; an unforgivingly hard wooden chair with a slanting back in the house's parlor, which, when revolved, proves brilliantly to be little more than the mean profile of a plow (a chair on which The Bride, at various moments in the staging, looks forward to birthing a baby and imagines distressing over The Husbandman's absence); and a slanting boulder in the yard, sufficiently obdurate to support The Revivalist's entire weight and to break the back of The Husbandman who will have to clear it.

What Noguchi did not expressly provide in the way of modernist misery, Graham meticulously filled in. Here is Noguchi: two steps to the house's front door, an architectural expression of aspiration and hope that is both humble and elegant. Here is Graham: The Bride, her body stiffened with multiple forebodings, rolls up and down the steps in turmoil, like a log in a tempest. The message is more encompassing than The Revivalist's caution that marriage (at least this marriage) is not going to be a picnic: it is that life itself is inevitably fraught with pain—so much that the moments of animal sweetness enjoyed by two people who momentarily forget themselves while kicking up their heels in a square dance to a lovely song, nakedly articulated, are tantamount to a blessing on an entire society.

MY OWN DANCEGOING experience of "Appalachian Spring"—which, from its creation until the past year or two, was performed exclusively by the Martha Graham Dance Company—began in the 1970s. Over the years, I have seen perhaps a dozen sets of Brides, Husbandmen, Pioneering Women, and Revivalists, including one gala performance, when Graham was still alive, in which The Husbandman was danced by Mikhail Baryshnikov and The Revivalist by Rudolph Nureyev. I have also seen the 1959 film (it is available for commercial rental) with Graham herself as The Bride, and Stuart Hodes as The Husbandman, Bertram Ross as The Revivalist, and Matt Turney as The Pioneering Woman—a frustrating experience, as the space looks cramped and Graham (then sixty-five) is too old to give the part a fully legible urgency. And once, at a seminar where the original Husbandman, Erick Hawkins, was present, a fragment of film containing the original 1944 cast—Graham, Hawkins, May O'Donnell, and, as The Revivalist, Merce Cunningham—was furtively screened, with the caution that the Graham estate did not countenance its public viewing. That fragment, which shows barely more than the processional entrance of the cast, has, for me, best represented the ballet as the masterpiece that its early audiences claimed it to be. The dancers in it were classicized instruments, with a light, dry step, a noble carriage, and faces that did not leak expression.

My sense of the work, then, has been synthetic, made up of bits and pieces from various performances, from reading, and from speculation. Performances of it by the Graham company over the past decade or so have been particularly agonizing, with The Bride becoming a gooey dependent and The Revivalist a cartoon. It never occurred to me that I would ever have the chance to see a full rendering of the "Appalachian Spring" I suspected Graham had made.

Until this year. In February, at The Boston Conservatory, the ballet was performed by two casts of student dancers, all in their early twenties, to live music by a student orchestra; and one cast and with set and costumes borrowed from the Graham company. One cast was ideal: urgent, unforced, various in their attack, austere in their mien, classicized instruments who did not act the choreography but rather served as transparent conduits through which the dance unfolded. It turns out, moreover, that none of the dancers was primarily trained in Graham technique: they were ballet dancers who had been given an intensive month of Graham training just prior to rehearsals. I have never seen a more touching and excitingly danced Bride (Liyin Chen) and Husbandman (Kurt Douglas), or a Pioneering Woman (Shannon Andrews) with more generous amplitude of movement and finer understanding of her healing role. The Revivalist, Vietnamese-born Dam Huynh, was a particular revelation, whose furious dance oration—wickedly light and mysteriously terrorizing, with jumps that seemed to lack any preparatory plié—convinced me I had come as close as I ever would in life to the young Merce Cunningham.

WHAT DID THESE students do that other casts of professional dancers, with decades of dedicated experience in Graham technique, did not? The short answer is that they were in sharp focus at every moment. What this means is, first, that each dancer knew exactly why he or she was on that stage, that each carried an individual story about his or her character into the common playing field. The second cast did this, too; but the stories of the first cast were more persuasive. By seeing two casts, one also understood that the dancers' stories were quite individual—that they were not slavishly following the details of a literary blueprint. There were stark differences in character between the two Brides: Li Yin Chen of the first cast showed vulnerability within reserve, which seemed true to the Graham of the 1944 film; her Bride did not expect to control the future that she dwelt upon, and her passion was not a breaking loose but an implosion, an italicizing of her characteristic reserve, which lent depth to her portrayal. In terms of movement, the dancers of both casts were also attentive to transitions between sections or scenes, so that a walk far upstage, out of the limelight, was performed as if in a larger limelight of natural transcendence.

More, the way the dancers met the music was not predictable. Sometimes they would ride the melody, other times they would pick up the harmony or excavate an interior pulse rather than the rhythmic time signature. The soloists, especially, tailored their dancing to the musical phrase as it was being played at that moment—quite a challenge, since the conductor (Ronald Feldman) changed the tempi frequently, in a concert-hall fashion. That is, the dancers expended themselves to marry the music; they did not expect it to follow them. The result was thrilling—an experience equally attuned to the concerns of dance and the concerns of music.

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Yuriko—or more precisely, Yuriko Kikuchi, the Graham star who goes by her first name and who was a member of the original "Appalachian Spring" cast as one of the four Townswomen—was celebrating her eightieth birthday by coaching this production with Susan Kikuchi, her daughter, and another Graham company veteran, Elizabeth Auclair. Two weeks after the Boston performances, I sat in Yuriko's living room, watching a videotape of what I had seen live, and realized, to my astonishment, that I had not caught even half the brilliant details of performance the first time around. What on earth had she done to draw such performances out of these students?

As we studied the tape, stopping and rewinding for her explanations of how this or that transfiguring effect had been achieved, it became clear that she had operated to cleanse the choreography of disfiguring accretions over decades within certain concrete conditions. Although Yuriko and her daughter had not themselves chosen the casts (they were selected by Janet Eilber, the Graham company's recently appointed director), they were permitted complete freedom to coach them, and the dancers permitted themselves to absorb the direction. The students had also been carefully prepared by Susan for the possibility that the tempi might vary dramatically in performance. By Yuriko's own account, she was a demanding taskmaster who refused to accept inferior or superficial performance solutions and who, on occasion, reduced at least one dancer to tears. "But they got used to me," she added.

Specifically, what they seem to have gotten used to was Yuriko and Susan's requirements for the soloists to "stretch" the movement organically to achieve "a conversation with the music." Putting on a videotape of the same cast in a different performance, she made it possible for me to recognize the subtlest changes in attack and phrasing, the success of slight delay in a pitch turn here, the slight failure of a gesture to embrace the music fully there. At one point, I exclaimed over a particularly wonderful passage in the couple's dances for each other, and Yuriko, bemused, commented: "This is what happens when you release them from being slaves to the counts." She observed also that the dancers had understood that "the transitions between sections are what make this dance."

When we had finished watching all the tapes, she sat back and was silent for a while. Then she said, "I was coaching them from what I remembered, from the physical and mental sensations." (She had also danced the part of The Bride, under Graham's direction, during her performing career.) "Now, though, I see this dance from the choreographic point of view. It's pretty great, isn't it?" Yes, indeed. As the tapes unquestionably demonstrate, this cast, coached by these individuals, is pretty great. It would be a restorative gift to the memory of Martha Graham if they could dance Boston's "Appalachian Spring" again in several cities, including New York. ■

The fairy tales of evolutionary psychology.

Of Vice and Men

By JERRY A. COYNE

A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion by Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer

(MIT Press, 272 pp., $28.95)

I.

IN SCIENCE'S PECKING order, evolutionary biology lurks somewhere near the bottom, far closer to phrenology than to physics. For evolutionary biology is a historical science, laden with history's inevitable imponderables. We evolutionary biologists cannot generate a Cretaceous Park to observe exactly what killed the dinosaurs; and, unlike "harder" scientists, we usually cannot resolve issues with a simple experiment, such as adding tube A to tube B and noting the color of the mixture.

The latest deadweight dragging us closer to phrenology is "evolutionary psychology," or the science formerly known as sociobiology, which studies the evolutionary roots of human behavior. There is nothing inherently wrong with this enterprise, and it has proposed some intriguing theories, particulary about the evolution of language. The problem is that evolutionary psychology suffers from the scientific equivalent of megalomania. Most of its adherents are convinced that virtually every human action or feeling, including depression, homosexuality, religion, and consciousness, was put directly into our brains by natural selection. In this view, evolution becomes the key—the only key—that can unlock our humanity.

Unfortunately, evolutionary psychologists routinely confuse theory and speculation. Unlike bones, behavior does not fossilize, and understanding its evolution often involves concocting stories that sound plausible but are hard to test. Depression, for example, is seen as a trait favored by natural selection to enable us to solve our problems by withdrawing, reflecting, and hence enhancing our future reproduction. Plausible? Maybe. Scientifically testable? Absolutely not. If evolutionary biology is a soft science, then evolutionary psychology is its flabby underbelly.

But the public can be forgiven for thinking that evolutionary biology is equivalent to evolutionary psychology. Books by Daniel Dennett, E. O. Wilson, and Steven Pinker have sold briskly, and evolutionary psychology dominates the media coverage of the science of evolution. (It has figured also in the media's treatment of politics, as when the lustful activity of Bill Clinton was explained—or explained away—by various evolutionary psychologists as the behavior of an "alpha male.") In view of the scientific shakiness of much of the work, its popularity must rest partly on some desire for a comprehensive "scientific" explanation of human behavior. Evolutionary psychology satisfies the post-ideological hunger for a totalistic explanation of human life, for a theory of inevitability that will remove many of the ambiguities and the uncertainties of emotional and moral life. Freud is no longer the preferred behavioral paradigm. Now Darwin is ascendant. Blame your genes, not your mother.

Hence the excitement—and the furor—that has greeted the publication of Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer's book. Determined to show that human rape is a "natural, biological phenomenon that is a product of the human evolutionary heritage," Thornhill and Palmer take issue with social scientists and feminists (viewed as permanently conjoined Siamese twins)

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for whom rape represents men's deliberate attempt to subjugate and to humiliate women. In their account, by contrast, the motive for rape is not just sexual; it is also reproductive. Rape, they argue, was favored by natural selection to give sexually dispossessed males the chance to have children, or males with mates the chance to have extra children.

> There are several mechanisms by which such a [sexual] strategy could function. For example, men might resort to rape when they are socially disenfranchised, and thus unable to gain access to women, through looks, wealth or status. Alternatively, men could have evolved to practice rape when the costs seem low—when, for instance, a woman is alone and unprotected (and thus retaliation seems unlikely), or when they have physical control over a woman (and so cannot be injured by her).

They further claim that attempts to root out rape will not succeed until one accepts its evolutionary origin and uses this precious knowledge as a basis for social policy.

> Not only does an evolutionary approach generate new knowledge that could be used to decrease the incidence of rape; some of the proposals put forth by individuals uninformed by evolutionary theory may actually *increase* it.

The coverage of *A Natural History of Rape* in the media has been critical, but largely devoted to pitting Thornhill and Palmer against feminists, who see the book as a misogynistic attempt to justify rape and to unravel the progress of recent decades. The results were predictable and largely unproductive: a lot of sound bites and shouting in television studios. Meanwhile the book has been warmly embraced by some evolutionary psychologists, notably by Pinker, who has praised it as a "courageous, intelligent and eye-opening book with a noble goal." Nearly all of these public debates have been fuelled by ideology. (Again, evolutionary psychology functions very much like an ideology.) What has been missing is a discussion of the science that lies behind, or does not lie behind, Thornhill and Palmer's assertions. After all, the book is only as good as their evidence.

Thornhill and Palmer have frequently invoked the authority of science in defense of their evolutionary conception of rape. They insist that their detractors are ideologically motivated, whereas they are dispassionate scientists whose only priority is objective truth. In their media appearances, they have implied that their science is incontrovertible, and that any dissenter from their conclusions must be philosophically or politically blinkered. This is a grotesque misrepresentation of the book's science, which has by no means drawn unanimous approbation from the scientific community. Far from it: to a scientist, the scientific errors in this book are far more inflammatory than are its ideological implications.

Like so much of evolutionary psychology, Thornhill and Palmer's book is utterly lacking in sound scientific grounding. Moreover, the authors use rhetorical tricks that mislead the general reader about their arguments. Once its scientific weaknesses are recognized, *The Natural History of Rape* becomes one more sociobiological "just-so" story—the kind of tale that evolutionists swap over a few beers at the faculty club. Such stories do not qualify as science, and they do not deserve the assent, or even the respect, of the public.

II.

THORNHILL AND PALMER'S thesis is based on certain current ideas about the evolution of sex differences. It is obvious that men and women show clear differences in many visible traits, from body size to breasts. No biologist would deny that these differences resulted from natural selection acting on our ancestors. (A wide pelvis for women, for example, is essential in childbirth.) And given the agreement on the evolutionary basis of physical differences, it would seem foolish to deny a priori that evolution did not also produce some behavioral differences. It is true that human culture and learning may affect behavioral traits more readily than morphological ones, but there is convincing evidence that some behavioral differences evolved because they increased the reproductive success of our ancestors.

Since rape is an act of sexual aggression, the pertinent question is whether males and females evolved to differ in aggression and in sexual behavior. Most evolutionists believe that they did. Of course, there are aggressive and sexually promiscuous women as well as meek and monogamous men; but we are talking averages here. Evolved differences need not be seen in every individual: many men are smaller than the average woman.

In mammals, we see a fundamental asymmetry between the roles of the two sexes. Females must invest a great deal in their offspring (in the case of humans, nine months of metabolic trauma plus untold years of nursing and subsequent aggravation), while males can get away with investing very little (minimally one dose of sperm, before moving on to the next female). This leads, in general, to a marked difference in mate-selection strategies between the sexes. For the female, it pays to be prudent and picky: she has relatively few shots at reproduction, so she must make each opportunity count by choosing the best possible father for her children. The male has a different approach: he wants to inseminate as many females as possible. He is interested in quantity, not in quality.

For this reason, males inevitably compete for access to females. Darwin recognized that such competition occurs in two fundamentally different ways: either males try to impress the females (the peacock strategy) or they try to directly dominate the other males (the deer strategy). It is the latter course that seems most pertinent to the sexual behavior of humans, and it is this internecine male competitiveness that is assumed to have driven not only the evolution of increased male body size (on average, bigger is better in a physical contest), but also of hormonally mediated male aggression (there is no use being the biggest guy on the block if you are a wallflower).

Whatever the role of culture—of "nurture" rather than "nature"—in determining our behavior, our evolutionary legacy is certainly alive and well in the difference in size between males and females, and in those aggression-promoting male hormones. It is no accident that most rapists, and most violent criminals, are men. Feminists are undoubtedly right to claim that culture reinforces sexual stereotypes; but still there can be no adequate explanation of patriarchy that completely ignores evolution.

THORNHILL AND PALMER perform a rather ingenious trick by advancing two disparate theories, both in support of the idea that rape is "natural and biological." The first is called the "by-product hypothesis," which maintains simply that rape is a side effect of other evolved human traits. In other words, rape is "evolutionary" because it is performed by men whose brains, bodies, and behavior have evolved to a point at which rape is physically and emotionally possible. This is a reasonable view—indeed, a tautology—that few biologists will find objectionable. The second hypothesis is called "direct adaptation," and it maintains that rape is much more than an evolutionary by-product: it is a direct adaptation installed by natural selection to allow sexually disenfranchised men to produce children.

This latter view is far more controversial, and it is clearly the centerpiece of Thornhill and Palmer's book. Nearly all of the discussion and the cited evidence

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are directed at proving the truth of this second theory.

III.

THE "BY-PRODUCT HYPOTHESIS" views rape as a mere side effect of other adaptations that natural selection built into our ancestors. That is, natural selection did not favor genes impelling men to rape, but genes for other features of human emotion and behavior that, in combination with human culture, allow the existence of rape. Thornhill and Palmer are not explicit about which evolved features produce rape as a side effect, but a good guess is a mixture of male promiscuity and aggression. This mixture, especially if combined with a male animus toward women, might readily explain rape. In this view, rape is an act of sexual violence—an outlet for rage and sexual release directed at a convenient target. It is an act of sex *and* violence, with one or the other predominating according to circumstances (date rape is more sexual, the violent rape of strangers is more aggressive).

Given that rapists, in most reported cases, are sexually aroused and often reach orgasm, and that some convicted rapists admit to erotic motives, it is hard to disagree with Thornhill's and Palmer's claim that rape is at least partly a sexual act. But this claim is hardly new. Indeed, the sexual dimension of rape is painfully obvious. But Thornhill and Palmer assert that "academic feminists and sociologists" have consistently denied any sexual motivation for rape, insisting instead that "rape is not about sex, but about violence and power." It is true that in recent decades the discussion of rape has been dominated by such notions, though one must remember that they originated not as scientific propositions but as political slogans deemed necessary to reverse popular misconceptions about rape.

The real problem with the by-product hypothesis is its banality. It explains *everything* about human beings. Since we have an evolutionary history, everything that we are and everything that we do can be furnished with an evolutionary explanation. There is no behavior that does not originate in our having a brain that is the product of natural selection. And this opens the evolutionary floodgates. Playing the violin? A by-product of creativity, manual dexterity, and the ability to learn. Collecting stamps? A by-product of our evolved desires to acquire resources and to categorize our environment.

But such explanations are crushingly trivial. The triviality of the by-product theory may be seen in Thornhill and Palmer's declaration:

> When one is considering any feature of living things, whether evolution applies is never a question. The only legitimate question is how to apply evolutionary principles. This is the case for all human behaviors—even for such by-products as cosmetic surgery, the content of movies, legal systems, and fashion trends.

Well, if Thornhill and Palmer want to lump rape together with tummy tucks and *Titanic* as "evolutionary" phenomena, God (or Darwin) bless them. We might as well throw in adoption (a by-product of parental care), masturbation (a by-product of uncontrollable sexuality), bestiality (ditto), and priestly celibacy (a by-product of religion, which is itself a by-product of some evolved feature that nobody understands). Of course, the interesting thing about masturbation, adoption, bestiality, and celibacy is that they are *maladaptive* traits: they could never have been favored by natural selection because their practice reduces the chance of propagating one's genes. And we should not forget non-sexual crimes such as murder, assault, and robbery—all those other by-products of evolution.

The key phrase in the passage that I have just adduced is "whether evolution applies is never a question." This is an explicit admission that the by-product hypothesis lacks the defining property of any scientific theory—the property of falsifiability, the ability to be disproven by some conceivable observation. An unfalsifiable theory is not a scientific theory. It is a tautology, or an article of faith. The by-product theory may justify the view of rape as an evolutionary pathology, an indirect consequence of male sexuality and aggression; and the by-product theory may also justify the feminist view that rape is simply a way for males to dominate and humiliate females. And so we can dismiss the by-product hypothesis, because there is no observation that could disprove it.

IV.

AFTER PROPOSING THE by-product hypothesis as their fallback position, Thornhill and Palmer introduce the centerpiece of their book: the direct-selection hypothesis. This theory holds that rape is not merely an aggressive act or a sexual act, but a reproductive act—that is, one inserted by natural selection into men's brains. As the story goes, men who lack committed relationships and are unable to find mates in the usual ways can produce offspring by raping unwilling women. The frequency of genes causing rape would increase at the expense of genes carried by equally

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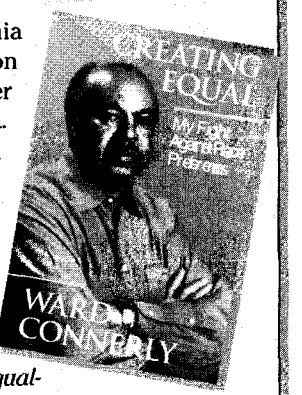

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disenfranchised but nonraping males, who leave no offspring. This would eventually lead to the brain's acquisition of a "rape chip," a behavior as hardwired as our tendencies to sleep and to eat.

In the direct-selection theory, all men are born as potential rapists, but they do not necessarily rape because the effect of the act on reproduction depends on external circumstances. For one thing, rape can be favored by natural selection only when it gives rapists a net reproductive gain. Thus, Thornhill and Palmer suggest that natural selection has also endowed men with the ability to perform a reproductive cost-benefit analysis before raping. The benefit is the likelihood that the act will produce a genetically related offspring. The cost is that the rapist might be caught and severely punished, depriving him of future offspring. Men will therefore rape when they are most likely to get away with it. Moreover, the theory predicts that men are selected to evaluate not just circumstances but also victims, choosing those most likely to be fertile. As with all behavioral adaptations, the rapist need not be conscious of the evolutionary wellsprings of his actions, just as we do not ponder the need to stoke our metabolism when sitting down to dinner.

VIEWING RAPE AS a module of the male brain is provocative enough; but Thornhill and Palmer go on to propose, in the manner of evolutionary psychologists, that many other aspects of rape are direct adaptations. While they see rape as adaptive for men, they concede that it is not so for women, who suffer physical violence, emotional trauma, possible alienation of their partner, and loss of their own evolved ability to choose the best mate. Natural selection therefore gives women their own adaptation: the post-rape trauma. "Psychological pain is an adaptation that functions against such [reproductive] losses by focusing on the causes of the losses. The result is that attention is directed toward ways of dealing with current circumstances, given the loss, and of avoiding a repetition of events that caused the loss." (As I have noted, others have proposed a similar explanation for the evolution of depression. I doubt, though, whether rape victims and depressives use their trauma so productively.) And since the partner of a rape victim may be unsure whether a subsequent child is his, Thornhill and Palmer propose yet another direct adaptation: male suspicion about their mate's claim that she was raped. That, too, is biologically mandated.

Finally, in a theory almost unbelievably grandiose, Thornhill and Palmer suggest that the opposition to their theories is itself based on evolution. Our brains, they say, are so much the product of evolution that they have been preprogrammed with a set of beliefs, one of which is a reluctance to believe explanations involving evolution: "Evolved psychological intuitions about behavioral causation can mislead individuals into believing that they know as much as experts do about proximate human motivation." Don't like the theory? Trust the "experts," who have painfully overcome their aversion to evolution. (This is one of the ways in which the new evolutionary psychologists resemble the old Marxists: there is no place to stand outside their system of meaning, except for the privileged place where they themselves stand.)

Although Palmer himself professes to favor the "by-product hypothesis," the authors continuously push the mixture of directly adaptive theories that I have just described. The direct-selection theory first appears in the fourth chapter of the book, and the remaining eight chapters are devoted to discussing this theory alone and its implications for society. All of the evidence supplied supports the view that rape is a direct adaptation, and not an evolutionary by-product. (The latter theory requires no evidence because it is true by definition.)

THORNHILL AND PALMER employ three lines of evidence to support the direct-selection hypothesis. First, they maintain that rape occurs as an adaptive phenomenon in other species, and thus could have evolved by the same route in humans. In scorpion flies, Thornhill's own research organism, males have an abdominal clamp that apparently evolved to help them forcibly restrain females who resist their courtship. Several other species also seem to show forced copulation, although whether it increases the male's reproduction is not known. But surely it is absurd to assume that rape may be a reproductive strategy in humans because it is a reproductive strategy in flies or ducks. Flies and ducks do not create, and live in, a culture, as humans do; and human culture guarantees that there will be many meaningless parallels between the behavior of humans and of other species. Like dandelion seeds, we parachute, but we do so for recreational reasons, not for reproductive reasons. The simple-minded extrapolation from a handful of animal species is no proof that human rape is a direct adaptation.

The second test of the theory involves performing the actual reproductive calculus of a human rapist. Do rapists really have more children over the course of their lives than equally dispossessed but nonraping males? This calculation cannot be made, given the large number of unreported rapes (figures range from fifty percent to 80 percent) and of rapists who are never caught. According to Thornhill and Palmer, a single rape in peacetime has about a two percent chance of producing pregnancy.

The problem is that we will never know the reproductive *costs*. Does the chance of being caught lower a rapist's future reproductive output by more than two percent? Indeed, such a calculus, based on modern statistics, may be completely irrelevant to judging the costs and the benefits obtaining when rape really evolved. As the authors note, the selection that built any "rape module" probably occurred in our distant evolutionary past, when society was not at all like ours. Human civilization, after all, arose in only the last one-tenth of one percent of the interval since we branched off from our primate ancestors.

All that we can say, therefore, is that the reproductive benefits of ancestral rapists may have been lower than those of modern rapists (because of a lack of contraception, it is possible that females were pregnant far more often than they are now, and subsequent nursing of a child usually suppresses ovulation); and the costs may well have been higher (given the lack of jails, punishments for rape were probably more severe, and the chances of getting caught higher in small social groups). But the important point is that all such speculations remain mere stories about our unrecoverable past. Thornhill and Palmer are undoubtedly right to note that current observations about rape may bear little relation to forces acting in our ancestors; but then they ignore their own warnings, and proceed to argue for the direct-selection hypothesis by using statistics from modern Western societies.

THE HIGHLIGHT OF Thornhill and Palmer's evidence—their third method of supporting the direct-selection hypothesis—is a series of "predictions" about what one would expect to see if rape had evolved as a direct adaptation. These predictions (all supposedly verified by the authors' research) are meant to confer the prestige of rigorous science upon their argument. Examined closely, however, the scientific evidence fails, and on three counts.

First, it is hard to see from modern statistics that rape increases reproduction. Thornhill and Palmer make much of their verified prediction that women of reproductive age are overrepresented as rape victims, as one might expect if rapists prey on potential childbearers. But looking closer, one finds that a significant number of rape victims are either too old or too

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young to reproduce. According to Thornhill and Palmer themselves, one cited study showed that twenty-nine percent of victims were younger than eleven. (This estimate of underaged victims may be low, given the frequency of unreported child molestation.) Other studies concur; and, when one adds in post-menopausal women, at least a third of all female rapes involve victims who cannot reproduce. Also, roughly twenty percent of all rapes do not involve vaginal penetration, and fifty percent of all rapes do not include ejaculation in the vagina. So these (although there is some overlap between these classes) must also be excluded from the reproductive category.

Thornhill and Palmer note that while few rapes in peacetime are accompanied by murder—as expected if it is a reproductive act—more than twenty-two percent of rapes involve violence in excess of what is needed to force copulation. This rather plainly supports the view that at least some rapes involve anger and gratuitous violence, and are not completely motivated by a desire to reproduce. Moreover, roughly ten percent of all rapes in peacetime are gang rapes, and, insofar as they involve more males than are needed to overcome the victim, they must be considered less adaptive than individual rapes because competition between ejaculates lowers each rapist's chance to reproduce.

Although we lack hard statistics, anecdotal evidence also suggests that many wartime rapes involve large groups of soldiers, and often culminate in the murder and the sexual mutilation of the victim. These, of course, are acts of sexual violence, pure and simple, and cannot in any way be attributed to reproduction. And what about wartime bordellos, such as those set up by occupying Japanese during World War II, in which kidnapped women were repeatedly raped by many different soldiers? Finally, same-sex prison rapes, which in most states are not even counted as rapes, cannot produce offspring, but involve the subjugation of victims for sex, power, and humiliation. There are thus a great many rapes that cannot be explained as attempts to reproduce.

V.

Of course, not all biological adaptations are perfect, or apparent in every individual. Anorexics, for example, clearly contravene our evolutionary dictate to eat. Still, the large number of exceptions to what is proposed by Thornhill and Palmer as a direct adaptation is disturbing. The problem is that they never specify what percentage of rapes need be potentially reproductive to show that rape evolved. Fifty percent? Eighty percent? (Indeed, the vaginal-ejaculation data show that the proportion of "reproductive" rapes cannot exceed fifty percent; and this upper limit becomes even smaller if we include male victims.) As with most sociobiological arguments, only *some* level of concordance with prediction need be found to brand an act as an adaptation.

Faced with many clear cases of nonadaptive rapes, Thornhill and Palmer revert to their fallback positions: the by-product hypothesis, and special pleading about the different conditions of our evolutionary past. Thus, confronted by the annoying fact that some rapists have wealth and high status, the authors immediately invoke the by-product hypothesis: "Rape by men with high status and abundant resources may arise from a combination of impunity and the hypothetical adaptation pertaining to evaluation of a victim's vulnerability. If so, their raping must result from adaptations other than that suggested by the second hypothesis [direct adaptation]. . . ."

In this way, Thornhill and Palmer have constructed an apparently airtight case, an argument that cannot be refuted. Aspects of rape that seem adaptive must have evolved by direct selection, while nonadaptive aspects are seen as evolutionary holdovers or as by-products. Lawyers call this "arguing in the alternative." It is not science, it is advocacy. And if *many* rapes can be written off as nonadaptive acts, why don't Thornhill and Palmer even consider the possibility that *all* rapes might be nonadaptive?

And there is another difficulty that Thornhill and Palmer do not face. For nearly all of their observations, there are reasonable alternative explanations that do not involve direct selection. As predicted by the direct-selection hypothesis, for example, rapists tend to be young men from lower socioeconomic classes, who supposedly have limited access to mates. (Thornhill and Palmer offer no evidence, by the way, for a correlation between class status and access to mates.) But such men are disproportionately represented among *all* violent criminals, including those committing murder, armed robbery, and assault. Why does this observation confirm the direct-selection hypothesis, instead of the simpler view that deprived, angry males commit violent acts that could gain them reputation, sex, or money?

Among rape victims, similarly, women between the ages of eighteen and thirty are over-represented compared to older

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women, as predicted by the idea that rapists prefer fertile victims. But what is the relative vulnerability of women of different ages to being raped? Could they differ in their availability to men who would molest them, or in their relative tendency to report rape? Or could the mostly young rapists merely be finding victims within their easily accessed peer group?

Why, precisely, is rape "a horrendous experience for the victim?" Thornhill and Palmer have an answer: the loss of mate choice or the alienation of existing mates. It is quite an answer. But it is not only offensive, it is also incoherent. Why not argue that any violation of the body is traumatic, with rape being the most extreme intrusion? Surely victims of homosexual rape do not walk away mentally unscathed. The reader may find it interesting, and not all that hard, to devise plausible alternatives for the other half-dozen observations that Thornhill and Palmer offer as proof of the direct-selection theory.

THORNHILL AND PALMER also cite earlier work that seems to support the direct-selection theory, but a trip to the library shows that they misrepresent at least some of this literature. Lacking the time to look up every citation, I decided to check three claims about rape taken from Thornhill's own earlier publications. I was shocked to find that none of these claims are supported by the cited articles.

According to Thornhill and Palmer, the literature shows that raped women of reproductive age suffer more trauma than do older and younger victims (this is an essential element of their argument, since they see rape trauma as a direct adaptation); that older and younger victims suffer less rape-inflicted violence than do reproductive-age women (the latter fight harder to protect their eggs, and males fight harder to fertilize them); and also that, compared to either pre-reproductive or post-reproductive victims, raped females of reproductive age experience a higher proportion of penile-vaginal intercourse (rapists can recognize fertile females). These three assertions derive from a study of 790 rape victims examined at Philadelphia General Hospital in 1973 and 1974. The results were summarized by Thomas McCahill, Linda Meyer and Arthur Fischman in *The Aftermath of Rape*, which appeared in 1979, and were further analyzed in three papers by Thornhill and Nancy Thornhill, an anthropologist and his former wife.

In the three publications by Thornhill and Thornhill, the data show that while younger women (under twelve years) do indeed experience less trauma, violence, and vaginal rape than do reproductive-age women between the ages of twelve and forty-four, older women do not differ from reproductive-age females. The authors thus achieve their "supportive" results by sleight of hand: they lump together younger and older women when comparing them to reproductive-age women, and the difference between these "reproductive" and "nonreproductive" victims results entirely from the effect of the youngest age class. This improper combining of heterogeneous data allows the authors to state, misleadingly, that "the study showed that reproductive-age victims suffered significantly more psychological trauma than non-reproductive-age rape victims," and that "reproductive-age rape victims were more often subjected to violent attacks than victims in the other two categories."

These three "predictions," then, are supported by the one comparison (younger versus reproductive) but not by the other comparison (older versus reproductive). The general claim for rape and trauma as adaptations is achieved only by fiddling with the data. This is not the way that scientists normally behave. Moreover, even the differences between the youngest class and the two older classes may be caused by phenomena other than natural selection. Lack of vaginal intercourse in younger victims (some of them babes in arms) may be due to mechanical problems. Moreover, in the trauma study, the reactions of young girls (from two months to eleven years old) were often measured in an unusual way: by consulting third parties. As noted in Thornhill and Thornhill's original paper: "the child's caretaker sometimes helped the child respond to interview questions, or with very young victims, the caretaker gave the responses to the questions based on his/her perception of the effect of the sexual assault on the child." Does anyone really believe that a third party can accurately judge the degree to which a young child suffers increased "insecurities concerning sexual attractiveness" or "fear of unknown men"? Is it possible that caretakers may consciously or unconsciously try to minimize the trauma suffered by young girls? Or that young girls—or women of any age—may show full trauma only after a period of time? (All victims were interviewed within five days of the rape.)

There are other problems with these cited studies, including the failure to apply standard statistical corrections that, when used, weaken the "supportive" results; but we need not go further. The studies discredit themselves. I emphasize again that these are the only bits of supporting "evidence" that I checked. Did I happen, by chance, to find the only three inaccurate citations in the book?

Thornhill and Palmer can be very nasty about those who differ with their analysis, mainly sociologists and feminists. "[A]ccording to the assumptions of the social science explanation of rape," they write, "the problem of rape could be solved simply by teaching women that rape is a wonderful experience." Also, "because the evolutionary approach threatens the theories and approaches that have traditionally been used to study human behavior, it poses a serious threat to the status of those who have achieved success in their fields using non-evolutionary approaches." Thornhill and Palmer care about truth, and everybody else cares about status.

In fact, Thornhill and Palmer are accusing others of what are really their own failings: "Not only is the bulk of the social science literature of rape clearly indifferent to scientific standards; many of the studies exhibit overt hostility toward scientific approaches, and specifically toward biological approaches. The message of these studies is clearly political rather than scientific." It is Thornhill and Palmer who are guilty of indifference to scientific standards. They buttress strong claims with weak reasoning and weak data. Their book lacks the measured tone and the openness to alternative theories that characterize truly scientific work. (Compare their sledgehammer approach with the moderate tone of *On the Origin of Species*.) It is perfectly clear to any fair-minded reader of *A Natural History of Rape* that its objective is not to test whether rape is an adaptation, but to demonstrate it. Their evolutionary-psychological explanation of rape is not their conclusion, it is their premise.

VI.

BY CLAIMING THAT rape is a natural biological act, Thornhill and Palmer immediately lay themselves open to the accusation of making excuses for rapists. They repeatedly distance themselves from this accusation (who wouldn't?), properly claiming that to equate "natural" with "allowable" or "good" is a common error, known as "the naturalistic fallacy." They add that evolved biological impulses should not be used in court as a defense of rapists, even though their own work has made such a defense possible.

But they do declare that social policies to eliminate rape will not work unless they take into account the crime's evolutionary origin. Their "evolutionarily-informed" suggestions are either obvious and derivable from non-evolutionary views of rape (punish rapists more harshly, teach young men not to rape, urge women to avoid

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secluded spots) or fatuous (build male and female summer camps farther apart, use chaperones early in a relationship) or invidious (counsel rape victims by telling them that their trauma is adaptive).

Thornhill and Palmer justify Darwinian anti-rape courses for men by noting that "individuals who really understood the evolutionary bases of their actions might be better able to avoid behaving in an 'adaptive' fashion that is damaging to others." Does anyone imagine that young men will be less inclined to rape when they are told that it is in their genes? Or that rape victims will be consoled by knowing that their trauma and their depression have evolutionary roots? Thornhill and Palmer also claim that women in scanty dress are more likely to be raped, and should keep this risk in mind when picking their clothes.

> Young women should also be informed that female choice, over the course of the evolution of human sexuality, has produced men who will be quickly aroused by signals of a female's willingness to grant sexual access.... And it should be made clear that, although sexy clothing and promises of sexual access may be means of attracting desired males (Cashdan 1993), they may also attract undesired ones.

The reader will search in vain, however, for any evidence that more skin provokes more rape. The source of Thornhill and Palmer's advice on this point is a mystery.

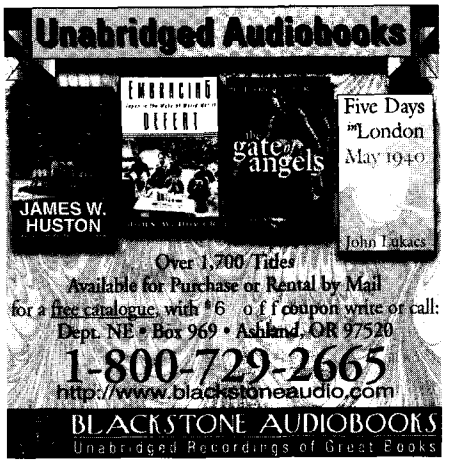
WHICH BRINGS US to the largest question broached by this book. Can knowledge about evolution play a useful role in reforming society? I strongly doubt it. The best approach to stopping crime, for example, seems to be the pragmatic one: do what works best, regardless of the crime's evolutionary underpinnings. Must we study the evolutionary basis of murder to deal effectively with it? Should we think about the evolution of greed when making anti-trust laws? A useful parallel may be drawn from medicine. Can an understanding of the evolutionary origin of a disease facilitate its cure? We know both the genetic and evolutionary roots of only one malady: sickle-cell anemia. The gene that causes this disease also helps to fight malaria, and thus sickle-cell anemia is common in residents of mosquito-infested areas of Africa (and in their black American relatives). But this knowledge is of absolutely no comfort to those suffering from the disease, and it has been of no use to physicians trying to cure it.

While denouncing feminists and sociologists for their misguided and scientifically uninformed attempts to deal with rape, Thornhill and Palmer overlook the major improvements that these groups effected in legal and cultural attitudes toward rape. The dropping of the legal requirement for eyewitness corroboration of rape, and the restriction of the use in court of a victim's prior sexual history; the founding of rape crisis centers; the establishment of more compassionate attitudes toward victims by police, hospital staffs, psychiatric counselors, and juries: all of these constructive policy changes were brought into being by (to use Thornhill and Palmer's phrase) "individuals uninformed by evolutionary theory."

THORNHILL AND PALMER'S attempts to gain control of rape counseling, laws, and punishments, despite the weakness of their science, reveal their larger goal: the engulfment of social science and social policy by the great whale of evolutionary psychology. This attempted takeover is not new. It was first suggested in 1978 in E.O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*, and more recently in his *Consilience*, Wilson extended the program to nearly every area of human thought, including aesthetics and ethics. We are witnessing a new campaign for the Darwinization of Everything. Thornhill's and Palmer's theory of rape is just the most recent attempt at the annexation of all human experience to evolutionary psychology.

After all, if one can give a believable evolutionary explanation for the difficult problem of rape, then no human behavior is immune to such analysis, and the cause is significantly advanced. The apocalyptic tone that pervades Thornhill and Palmer's book reveals the party to which they belong: "The biophobia that has led to the rejection of Darwinian analyses of human behavior is an intellectual disaster." And "in addressing the question of rape, the choice between the politically constructed answers of social science and the evidentiary answers of evolutionary biology is essentially a choice between ideology and knowledge."

Let us be clear. It is not "biophobia" to reject the reduction of all human feelings and actions to evolution. Quite the contrary. It is biophilia; or at least a proper respect for science. The "choice between ideology and knowledge" is a real choice; but it is Thornhill and Palmer and the doctrinaire evolutionary psychologists who choose ideology over knowledge. They enjoy the advantage that people seem to like scientific explanations for their behavior, and the certainty that such explanations provide. It is reassuring to impute our traumas and our misdeeds to our savanna-dwelling ancestors. It lessens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the moral pressure on our lives. And so the disciplinary hubris of evolutionary psychology and the longing for certainty of ordinary men and women have combined to create a kind of scientistic cargo cult, with everyone waiting in vain for evolutionary psychology to deliver the goods that it doesn't have.

Amid this debacle—for *A Natural History of Rape* is truly an embarrassment to the field—I am somewhat consoled by the parallels between Freudianism and evolutionary psychology. Freud's views lost credibility when people realized that they were not at all based on science, but were really an ideological edifice, a myth about human life, that was utterly resistant to scientific refutation. By judicious manipulation, every possible observation of human behavior could be (and was) fitted into the Freudian framework. The same trick is now being perpetrated by the evolutionary psychologists. They, too, deal in their own dogmas, and not in propositions of science. Evolutionary psychology may have its day in the sun, but versions of the faith such as Thornhill and Palmer's will disappear when people realize that they are useless and unscientific. ■

Sects in the City

By ALAN WOLFE

The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington by Maurice Isserman

(Public Affairs Press, 464 pp., $27.50)

I.

IN 1988, A year before his death, Michael Harrington recounted to an interviewer his experiences in the Catholic Worker movement in the early 1950s. "People would ask, 'What are you here for?,'" he recalled. "'Well, I want to be a saint,'" went the group's agreed-upon response. Harrington was not a saint; and certainly not in his personal life. But he did impress many of those who knew him as someone so dedicated to his cause that he lacked ulterior motives. Harrington was an active participant in the socialist movements of his time, but he never sought power for his own sake. Through his writings he became famous, but it never seemed to go to his head. He loved public speaking, and was better at it than anyone else on the left; but he had an ego half the size of others in the movement who lacked his intelligence and charisma. He even earned some money, but he spent it on a move to the suburbs for the sake of his children.

In addition to his personal qualities, Harrington was also on the right side of many of the debates in which he engaged. Hating America bitterly for its involvement in Vietnam and its racism at home, New Leftists had a tendency to worship America's enemies—the North Vietnamese, the Cubans, and fighters for Third World liberation across the globe. Harrington's socialist politics inoculated him against (to use Francois Furet's term) the "illusion" of Communist virtue. And with one exception—his near-hysterical reaction to the Port Huron statement drafted by early New Leftists—Harrington delivered his criticisms to the New Left without the sour sarcasm of many an old socialist. A disproportionately large number of impatient New Left activists managed to respect Harrington no matter how often he tried to point out to them their foibles.

Harrington's life was not the kind likely to produce biographies intent on revealing, in the manner of the recent lurid books about the *Partisan Review* crowd, the private sins of the publicly prominent. Certainly Maurice Isserman's biography is not such a book. One can hardly imagine a more fair-minded treatment of Harrington's life and times. Isserman, who has written extensively on the American left, has a tendency toward gushy romanticism, but in this book he keeps it under control. While his own sympathies are themselves left-wing, and while he is often sympathetic to the positions that Harrington took, he is willing to criticize Harrington when he believes him to have made serious errors of judgment. One can say of Isserman that he is a trustworthy source—a high compliment when it comes to writing about such emotionally charged events. And Isserman's book is compulsively readable, at least for anyone who cares about the sectarian split-ups and reformations that he patiently traces. *The Other American* is one of the best biographies of an American leftist that we have.

Yet Isserman's book raises more questions than it answers. In particular, it raises the hardest possible question that one can ask about Harrington's public life: Was any of it worthwhile? Now that we have the story of Harrington's career told in all its detail, one is left with the impression of a man who generally knew better stooping to the lowest and the most counterproductive forms of sectarian politics of which the left is capable. This man of many talents devoted his life to a frenzy of speaking, writing, and organizing, all of which left the world no better off and in some ways rendered it worse. Harrington's life is instructive because he gave his life to a cause, but also because the cause devoured the man.

II.

MICHAEL HARRINGTON WROTE about the poor, but he was not of the poor. He was born in St. Louis in 1928, into a relatively prosperous and well-educated Irish Catholic family. An only child—a fact that suggests rigorous self-restraint on the part of his devout mother—Michael was sent to an elite Catholic high school, where he flourished under strict Jesuit training. (In his recent biography of another prominent twentieth-century American who received a Jesuit education, David Maraniss discusses Vince Lombardi's attraction to the priesthood; but if Harrington had any such inclinations, Isserman does not mention them.) After graduating from Holy Cross, Harrington tried both law school and graduate school before moving to New York and finding himself a home with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement.

Committed to voluntary poverty, frequent prayer, and both practical and agitational efforts to apply the social teachings of the Catholic Church to the social ills of America, the Catholic Worker movement seemed the perfect home for a young idealist such as Harrington. Still, Dorothy Day was no democrat. "Dorothy wanted to be an anarchist," remarked one of the movement's adherents, "but only if she got to be the anarch." Isserman points out that Day, roughly the same age as Harrington's mother, acted as a parental substitute toward Michael; but her single-mindedness also foreshadowed the sectarianism of the socialist movement. Under Day's tutelage, Harrington experienced for the first time the dilemma that would haunt him all his life: in giving himself over to a cause larger than himself, he found him-

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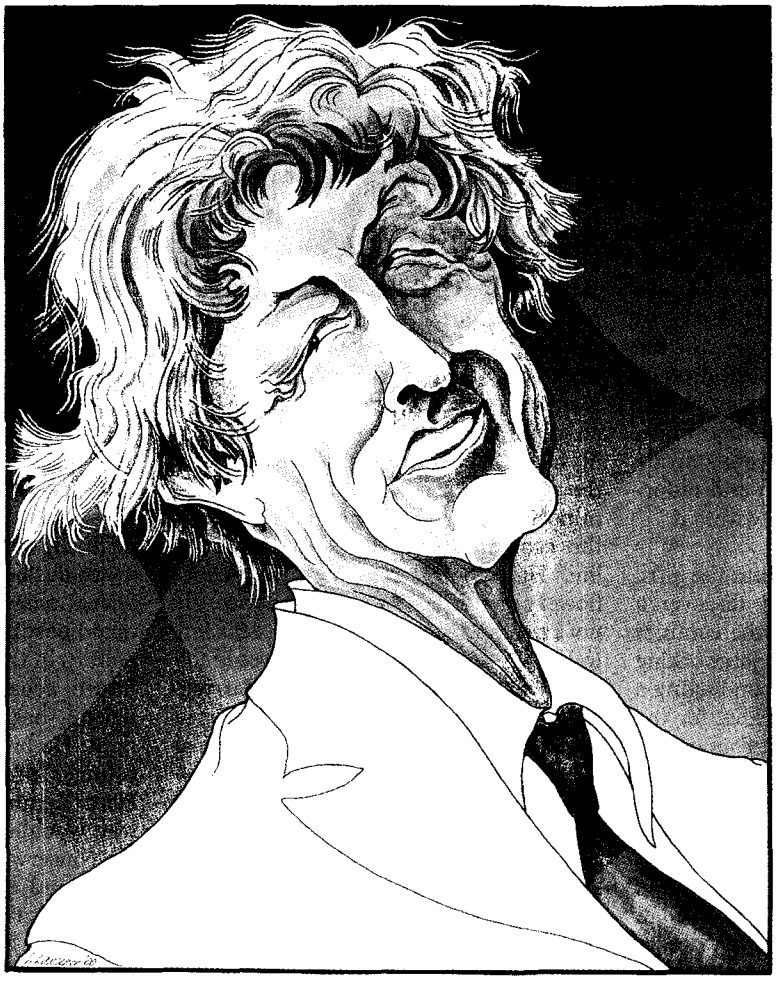
self unable to use the leadership skills with which he was undeniably blessed.

Harrington gravitated toward the movement's newspaper, not toward its shelters; and before long the young enthusiast found himself writing for liberal Catholic publications. In 1955, he had an article in the first issue of *The Village Voice*. Greenwich Village was no longer the bohemian haven that it had been, but it still had the legendary White Horse Tavern, which Harrington frequented in the evenings, and it still throbbed with left-wing activism. Harrington could have joined any one of a number of leftwing groups, but he cast his lot with the Young People's Socialist League, or YPSL.

The Socialist Party had once flourished in the United States: in 1912, Eugene Victor Debs, its presidential candidate, received close to a million votes. The party went into a decline in the years after World War I, but it re-emerged during the Great Depression under the leadership of Norman Thomas, attracting as many as 25,000 members. Still, the Party was riven with internal discord. Its older leadership, products of the Lower East Side and concentrated in the needle trades, tended to be foreign-born, active in labor unions, and cautiously conservative. During the 1930s, many of them were driven out of their own party by a faction known as the Militants, who were supported by Thomas and by the younger socialists organized into YPSL. As the old guard departed, Trotskyites came in, forming an alliance with Thomas and recruiting actively among YPSL adherents. That alliance lasted less than two years. Still, as marginal as all this may seem, the reverberations of the Trotskyite-SP alliance would be felt for half a century, on both the left and the right.

A proper appreciation of left-wing sectarianism requires a counterintuitive approach to the world. Ordinary people might think that a movement should be measured by its growth, but in the world of 1930s "progressive" infighting, success was measured by destruction. After the Trotskyites left the Socialist Party to form their own Socialist Worker's Party, one of their leaders, James Cannon, claimed credit for putting the SP "on the sidelines." The task of a vanguard, he wrote, "is not merely one of building a revolutionary party, but of clearing obstacles from its path. Every other party is a rival. Every other party is an obstacle." If you think like Cannon, you not only try to destroy the opposition, you hand them an invitation to try to destroy you. No sooner did the SWP split from the Socialist Party than other Trotskyites began to split from Cannon. One of them would eventually become Michael Harrington's mentor. His name was Max Shachtman.



Michael Harrington by Vint Lawrence for The New Republic

Shachtman was an irresistible figure to many radicals coming of age in the 1930s. He had once served as Trotsky's secretary, and so he had personal links to a man who led the Russian Revolution; and he was also untainted by the revolution's excesses, for he had assembled, for Trotsky's benefit, the names of those killed in Stalin's purges. And Shachtman was a theorist—not quite the same as an intellectual, but close enough in those days to persuade his followers that, like Marx, he had access to the secrets of history.

Shachtman was also enthusiastically sectarian. He split from the Socialist Worker's Party in 1940 along with James Burnham, and then breathed a sigh of relief when Burnham quickly split with him to start on the course that would lead to his ponderous essays for William F. Buckley's *National Review*. Like many radicals, Shachtman hoped that the end of World War II would usher in a new era. When it did not, he withdrew to Floral Park, a middle-class neighborhood in Queens, where he ran a mail-order business selling high fidelity components, and maintained a splinter group called the Socialist Youth League.

When Thomas supported the American role in Korea, Shachtman—who would later become an enthusiastic supporter of the American role in Vietnam—saw an opening, and instructed his followers in the Socialist Youth League to take over YPSL. Harrington was one of those followers. Although Harrington lacked killer instincts and was not good at bureaucratic infighting—Isserman points out that the hard-line Shachtmanites distrusted him as soft, despite his loyalty to them—he plunged directly into factionalist politics.

When he joined the socialist movement, in 1952, splinter groups were formed and dissolved with amazing rapidity, eventually resulting in the expulsion of Harrington and his friends from the Socialist Party. They responded by creating, in 1954, an organization that took its name by scrambling the word order of the Socialist Youth League to become the Youth Socialist League. The YSL epitomized the fate of socialist politics in America. Although the organization attracted people of considerable talent—besides Harrington, it included the sociologist Bogdan Denitch, the historian Peter Novick, and the educator Deborah Meier—it also encouraged its followers to adopt the Shachtmanite view that it was better to have a party, however small, that one could control than to preside over a movement, however large, that one could not control.

Like Cannon, Harrington and his friends were proud of the havoc that they wreaked on other organizations. Typical of the YPSL approach to politics was its effort

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to take over Students for Democratic Action, the youth affiliate of the liberal anti-Communist group Americans for Democratic Action. Voting as a bloc, trying to outwait their opponents into the night, playing on liberal guilt, and relishing a sense of persecution when liberals fought back, the Shachtmanites eventually succeeded in shutting the organization down. Their politics were not only mean-spirited, they were themselves mean. Isserman quotes one potential recruit who, recalling the way her boyfriend's speech was attacked, remembered "the cruelty, the savagery, of the way they went at each other."

"What was someone like Michael, with a reputation for intelligence and personal decency, doing mixed up in this kind of business?" Isserman asks. (Yes, he does refer to Harrington as "Michael" throughout.) He does not give a satisfying answer. Perhaps Harrington's Catholic upbringing prepared him for success in an organization that valued internal democracy so little. Perhaps the McCarthy period had a dispiriting effect on everyone. Yet the answer that comes across most strongly from Isserman's narrative is simply that Harrington had a split personality: warm and attractive to nearly everyone outside the movement, and sectarian and unforgiving to everyone he crossed within it.

As the '50s turned into the '60s, Harrington began to discover a larger world outside the confines of the socialist left. He took a job working with John Cogley, who was conducting a study of the Hollywood blacklist for the Fund for the Republic, a Ford Foundation effort to promote freedom of expression in the United States. He began to write for the journal *Dissent*, which was founded in 1954 by Irving Howe and other socialists who were fed up with Shachtmanite infighting and wanted to fashion an independent socialist voice. He became friends with Bayard Rustin and eventually met Martin Luther King Jr. He was even able to travel abroad after 1958, when the Shachtmanite group to which he belonged was removed from the attorney-general's subversive list.

It is in the nature of sectarian politics to prevent anyone's star from shining too brightly, and before long the knives came out. Shachtman got a resolution passed forbidding his followers from writing for *Dissent*, which Harrington managed to ignore. Gloria Steinem, a recent graduate of Smith College working as a CIA operative, identified Harrington, along with Zbigniew Brzezinski, as a promising candidate to attend a youth festival in Vienna. Anxious to go, Harrington sent a resume to C. D. Jackson at *Time* magazine and then asked his comrades in YPSL to finance the trip. They turned him down, and Harrington was forced to find the funds elsewhere.

There is nothing surprising in all this. As Susan Brownmiller relates in her recent autobiography *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, attempts would be made in the women's movement to bring Steinem down a peg or two when her involvement in the CIA was uncovered. What is surprising is why anyone would put up with all of it; Steinem, for one, managed to go her own way. But Harrington did not. Most people in his situation would have concluded that his comrades were little more than hopeless losers. Even as Deborah Meier and Bogdan Denitch broke with Shachtman, Harrington remained perversely loyal to him, in spite of his own highly visible public success.

No success was greater than the publication of *The Other America* in 1962. The book came about as a result of two articles in *Commentary*, then a magazine of the left, which attracted the interest of a number of publishers. At first Harrington threw away their letters, but an offer of a $500 advance finally turned his head. "Here are the unskilled workers, the migrant farm workers, the aged, the minorities, and all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life," Harrington wrote. Written without flowery rhetoric, *The Other America* did not glorify marginality and exclusion, unlike the strident leftism that would follow. "After one reads the facts," Harrington concluded, "either there are anger or shame or there are not." Words such as "responsibility" and "idealism" appear frequently in the book; words such as "socialism" do not appear at all.

After a review in *The New Yorker* by Dwight Macdonald that was nearly as long as the book, *The Other America* became a bestseller and reached the desk of Lyndon Johnson, whose first instincts as president were to prove that he could be a more effective liberal than the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy. Before he knew it, Harrington, the product of vituperative socialist politics, was commuting to Washington and serving on anti-poverty task forces. He was now famous, but as Isserman correctly writes, "what no one could have predicted was just how quickly his time was destined to pass."

If Harrington's public life was fashioned by the left-wing politics of the 1950s, it was destroyed by the left-wing politics of the 1960s. Harrington, who was thirty-six years old in 1964, was perfectly positioned to emerge as a broker between the old left and the new. Since he had started in politics so young, he knew personally those radicals who had come to prominence during the 1930s. At the same time, his youthful energy made him an obvious potential mentor to such New Leftists as Tom Hayden, who shared Harrington's Catholic background and his taste for combining action with theory.

Instead of bridging the gap between radical generations, however, Harrington managed to exacerbate it. He remained enough of a socialist sectarian to distrust the emerging New Left. Despite the fact that the Port Huron statement in 1962 went out of its way to distance itself from communism, Harrington accused the young radicals of "united-frontism"—an issue, he told them, "that was settled on the left twenty years ago." Harrington would apologize for these words for the rest of his life. Eventually Harrington fashioned a rapprochement with many New Leftists, but he clearly was never comfortable with those currents flowing through the 1960s that, influenced by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, turned in the direction of personal liberations rather than political ones.

Nor would Harrington's affinities for the conservative wing of American socialism survive the 1960s. When Harrington began to turn against the war in Vietnam, he finally split with Shachtman, although it would be more correct to say that Shachtman split with him. From his command post in Queens, Shachtman, whose politics in the 1930s had briefly attracted future neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol, began to move to the political right. He brought with him a number of younger protégés, such as Tom Kahn, Penn Kemble, and Joshua Muravchick, who would one day find themselves with the conservative wing of the Democratic Party and eventually with the Reagan administration. After Shachtman rejoined the Socialist Party—the fact that he had become indistinguishable from a right-wing conservative was no obstacle to his doing so—Harrington would assume the position for which he had always seemed destined: Norman Thomas's successor as America's most famous socialist. But by that time the Socialist Party had nowhere to stand in the American political spectrum.

The last twenty years of Harrington's public life were anticlimactic. He never again wrote a book with the influence of *The Other America*. His politics slowly became the politics of a fairly conventional liberal. The organizations in which he was active—especially the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee—never amounted to much of anything. There was a brief moment when he and his allies,

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through an organization called Democratic Agenda, achieved a modicum of influence within the Democratic Party, but the moment quickly faded. Through his friendship with European socialists such as Willy Brandt and Olaf Palme, Harrington got a sense of what might have been if America were not America. But America was America, and even when Harrington invited all the socialist leaders of the world to Washington, the American press ignored the event.

It would be incorrect to say that Harrington died a broken man. Stricken with cancer, he never lost his optimism or his generosity of spirit. At Queens College, where he and I both taught, a group of faculty met every Monday for lunch, and despite his visible deterioration Harrington attended with amazing regularity, and always had a good word to say for everyone. (Even for me: many other members of the luncheon group thought that I was becoming too conservative for their tastes.) Harrington managed to keep to a schedule of extensive public speaking until the end; but when he died, the socialist movement seemed to die with him. "In the years since Michael's death," concludes Isserman, "no claimant has emerged to pick up the mantle of Debs and Thomas and Harrington. Michael seems to represent the end of the line."

III.

THE BEST ARGUMENT that can be made for socialism is that, like conservatism, it keeps liberals honest. Barred from ever coming to power in a society as committed to capitalism as the United States, socialism ought to function as a movement of conscience, upholding ideals about equality and social justice to which society ought to aspire, even if they can never quite be reached. Michael Harrington's particular talent was to present those ideals in a way that goodhearted people who were not socialists could understand. If history will remember him, it will be because, through his speaking and writing, he would not allow Americans to forget their obligations to the unfortunate in their midst.

Harrington did not need the Socialist Party to do what he did best. If anything, his loyalty to the party undercut the effectiveness of his efforts. A good conscience cannot easily emerge from bad motives; and the one thing American socialists were best at doing was bringing out the worst in themselves. Politically speaking, the Socialist Party never succumbed to the temptation to worship communism. But temperamentally speaking, the Socialist Party was indistinguishable from communism. It was often said that had Michael Harrington been a Western European, he might have become a head of state. It is true that in certain ways Harrington was out of step with his own country, but it was more because he inherited the mantle of Eastern and Central European factionalism. The damage done by socialist infighting was not publicly visible during Harrington's life, but it is damningly visible in Isserman's book.

A LONG TRADITION OF sociological speculation attributes socialism's failure to take root in America to those factors, such as consumerism and a belief in the possibility of upward mobility, that made America "exceptional" compared with Europe. Yet theories of American exceptionalism take us only so far. To the explanation of socialism's failure, we must add the suicidal inclinations of the socialists themselves. Factionalism requires all the dishonesty and all the insincerity of any form of politics with little or no rewards of power.

Its pernicious consequences could be felt on the right as well as on the left. When Tom Kahn, one of the conservative Shachtmanites, went to work on civil rights issues, he met Bayard Rustin, and the two became lovers. Later Kahn emerged as a power in the Jackson wing of the Democratic Party, and in 1972 he wrote a speech for George Meany attacking George McGovern. "We listened to the gay-lib people," Meany said, relying on the words that Kahn provided him, "you know, the people who want to legalize marriage between boys and boys and between girls and girls.... We heard from the people who look like Jacks, acted like Jills, and had the order of johns about them." It takes someone who sincerely believes that the end justifies the means to distance himself from his own sexuality in quite this way.

Whatever their other differences, Shachtmanites of the left and the right shared a contempt for liberalism, and that included liberalism's capacity to recognize how experience ought to temper ideological certainty. When a conflict broke out in the Ocean-Brownsville section of Brooklyn in 1968 between African Americans, who wanted local control of their schools, and the United Federation of Teachers, which protested the firing or the reassignment of primarily Jewish teachers out of the district, the Shachtmanites quickly jumped in. The UFT was close to the Shachtmanites; Shachtman's wife was Albert Shanker's secretary, and the UFT field representative to Ocean Hill-Brownsville was Sandra Feldman, Shanker's successor, who is described by Isserman as a "veteran Shachtmanite." This was a tragic conflict, and there was justice on both sides. In retrospect, there is reason to believe that opponents of the local school board were right to insist that proper procedures be followed before teachers were reassigned; but it was also true that black-Jewish relations required a willingness to listen. Harrington recognized this, but he kept his doubts to himself as his comrades went about treating the conflict with their usual scorched-earth tactics. To this day, the American left has not recovered from the damage done to race relations by the Shachtmanites in 1968. Sometimes being correct is not enough.

THE PERNICIOUS CONSEQUENCES of socialist factionalism left their mark on the individuals involved as well, and on nobody more than Michael Harrington. At one level, Harrington's contribution to American life was diminished by socialism's demands on his time. The books that he wrote after *The Other America*—notably *The Accidental Century* and *The Politics at God's Funeral*—failed at least in part because Harrington was too busy fighting forgotten battles to concentrate on the writing of them. To survive politically, socialism needed to look to an uncertain future rather than to invoke the past, but Harrington, preoccupied with putting out one fire while starting another, was unable to do that. Sometimes there *is* a relationship between the personal and the political, and a man too busy to pay attention to his own emotional needs, let alone those of his wife and children, may not always convey a sense of trust in his leadership.

If Isserman's book has a weakness, it is that he never explains why Harrington simply could not get his priorities right. For reasons we will probably never understand, this man who meant so well lacked the confidence to strike out on his own, politically and emotionally. Harrington did not fail because socialism failed. Harrington failed because, when all was said and done, he made one terrible decision after another.

There will be those who will lament the fact that Harrington may well have been America's last socialist. Without ballast on the left, they believe, American politics will tilt ever further to the right. In their view, the fact that both Bill Clinton and Al Gore pay so much attention to the Democratic Leadership Council, which can be viewed as the successor to the Jackson Democrats of the 1970s, is proof enough of what happens when there are no Michael Harringtons around. Yet this is only part of the story. The fact that we have no more Michael Harringtons also means that we do not have to put up with self-destructive, self-important political

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messiahs who believe that the people closest to them in viewpoint are the first people whose influence needs to be crushed. Whatever else one can say about the state of the left in America today, there is no Max Shachtman working covertly from within to undermine it. If that is the price we have to pay for the absence of the likes of Michael Harrington, it may be a price worth paying. ■

Stop the Carnival

By JAROSLAW ANDERS

The New Sweet Style by Vassily Aksyonov translated by Christopher Morris

(Random House, 482 pp., $29.95)

VASSILY AKSYONOV, A Russian writer who has lived in the United States since 1981, is perhaps best known to readers in this country as the author of *The Burn*, an autobiographical novel on which he worked secretly before his departure from his homeland. It is a kind of compound portrait of his generation, known in Russia as *Ashestidesyatniki*, or the generation of the '60s. Born in 1932, Aksyonov saw, at the age of five, both of his parents arrested and sent to prison camps. Raised first by his aunt, at the age of sixteen he was allowed to join his mother, Evgeniya Ginzburg, former professor of history at Kazan University, in the Magadan penal colony in the northern Far East. That is where young Aksyonov finished high school. Later he studied medicine and worked as a medical intern in Leningrad. He started writing fiction in the late 1950s, during the period of relative liberalization known as "the thaw."

Aksyonov soon became one of the prominent representatives of his generation and a celebrity in the Soviet liberal intellectual circles. He held important editorial jobs, published profusely, made movies, even dabbled in acting. In the mid-'60s, however, things started to take a turn for the worse. The Soviet Union was undergoing a rapid re-freezing, much more severe and destructive than in other Communist countries. Aksyonov became the object of nasty attacks, some of them by former friends and allies such as Evgeny Evtushenko. In 1979 he had the audacity to publish, without official approval, a literary anthology called *Metropol*, and to announce the fact at a press conference. He was advised to leave the country. Soon afterward he was stripped of his citizenship, and he was unable to return to his country until Gorbachev's "glasnost."

This is more or less the story, minus the émigré chapter, that Aksyonov tells in *The Burn*. Its main hero, Tolya Von Steynbock, shares the author's childhood and youth, but in the novel he is allowed to live five alternate lives—as an artist, a scholar, a doctor, a jazz musician, and a writer—all of which relate part of Aksyonov's own experience and cover most of the options that were available to young Soviet writers and intellectuals trying to walk the thin line between open dissent and total sellout. In America Aksyonov also published, among others books, *The Island of Crimea*, a scathing satire about the West's alleged naïveté and complicity with the Communists; a two-volume saga (three volumes in Russian) of the Soviet intelligentsia under Stalinism, called *Generations of Winter* and *The Winter's Hero*; and a very eccentric book about America called *In Search of Melancholy Baby*.

Among his earliest novels, the most notable is surely *A Starry Ticket*, which was published in the Soviet Union in 1961. It tells of a group of restless, skeptical teenagers who bum their way to Tallin, the capital of Estonia, drawn to the old Hanseatic city by its proximity to the West. The book was a tremendous success; it was hailed as the Soviet *Catcher in the Rye*. It still reads well, though one has to remember that in the early 1960s it was an act of political daring to depict disenchanted Soviet youngsters dreaming about the West and rock and roll.

Relatively little known, at least in this country, is Aksyonov's work of the mid-'60s and the '70s, when he produced absurdist grotesques that bore a striking resemblance to the postmodern fiction of Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan. In *In Search of a Genre*, which appeared in Moscow in 1978, the hero, an illusionist and a necromancer, sets out on a series of picaresque adventures in an apparent attempt to figure out the real meanings and the possible uses of his supernatural gifts. The book was received by critics as Aksyonov's literary credo: that an artist is a confused magician, who mixes brazen confidence in his creative powers with uncertainty about their true character or even their true significance, and is constantly searching for his proper "genre."

WITH *THE NEW SWEET STYLE*, the Aksyonov of the surreal and the grotesque is back, and still searching; but his illusionist's act has grown stale and tiresome. This is unfortunate, because the novel seems to strive for a kind of synthesis of the writer's preoccupations: formal innovation, satire, generational testament, metaphysical inquiry. It fails to deliver on any of them.

Its main protagonist, Alexander (Alex, Sasha) Korbach seems at first to be yet another incarnation of Tolya Von Steynbock. A child of the purges brought up by a man who, as he later learns, is not his real father, and who quite possibly tried to kill him as a child, Alex grows up to become a polymath artist, an international celebrity, and a major operator on the Soviet cultural scene. A writer, an actor, a musician, and a movie-maker constantly rubbing shoulders with the likes of Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky, Vysotsky, and Okudzhava, as well as assorted party "liberals" and benevolent KGB agents, he runs his own cabaret theater, called "The Buffoons," which specializes in send-ups of classical works laced with current political innuendoes. Through cunning, audacity, and quiet compromise, Korbach manages to secure a measure of creative independence for himself and his colleagues:

> Gudok, the director, turned out to be amenable to good conversation over a frequently replaced bottle. All the male members of the troupe screwed the censor, a pretty girl from the Komsomol, and she turned from an informer into one of the fiercest partisans of the Buffoons, prepared to do literally anything for the home side. Several Marxists, reputed to be liberals even though they wrote speeches for Brezhnev, were put on the theater's advisory board, along with a couple of pillars of Slavophile art, to whom they proved that the Buffoons were not at all the product of the decaying Western culture but rather pure inheritors of the time-honored tradition of Russian *skomorokhi*.

JAROSLAW ANDERS writes frequently on East European literature.

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Alex likes his games and he plays them well. The moderate dangers are tonic to his life. Still, he is troubled by a vague sense of incompleteness. During a trip to a conference in Florence, he becomes obsessed with Dante and *dolce stil nuovo*, "the new sweet style" of the Italian trecento. He starts dreaming about writing a play about pure, Platonic love, which he calls *The Radiance of Beatrice*. Back home, as the Brezhnev gerontocracy slowly closes down all the remaining pockets of freedom, he suffers for the first time from panic attacks, and begins to question his role as a modern-day Askomorokh, the old Russian version of an itinerant jester.

The chapter on Korbach's life in Russia is certainly one of the best in the whole novel. In a series of delightful vignettes, it portrays the distorted, "in-between" world of Alex and his colleagues, who live an unhealthy mix of arts and politics, exhilaration and falsity. Despite his international fame and his phenomenal popularity, it is never clear whether Alexander Korbach is really a genius, or a celebrity of circumstance, or an artistic impostor. And so, when his luck finally runs out, and he is "advised" (just as Aksyonov was "advised" in 1980) to go abroad, we expect a moment of reckoning, a confrontation of his character and his talents with the world larger than the cozy (even if it is riddled with informers and sycophants) artistic community in Moscow.

The Consolations of Poetry

At four, William Blake saw God
in an upstairs window,
and angels in a tree at ten.
With me it's been the other

way around: glory flashes
on the pane and I see sunlight;
wings rustle in the aspens
and I see just the silver under-

sides of wind-tossed leaves.
And whereas Blake considered death
a mere "removing from one room
to another," I know that once

that door slams behind you,
there's no other room, and no
you to remove to it. So
Blake died singing and I won't.

But I don't whine about it either.
As Dr. Johnson said, it's foolish
to confound annihilation, which is
nothing, with the apprehension

of annihilation, which is dreadful.
I love the accidental, meaningless,
and temporary, and so (in case you
couldn't tell), I'm singing now.

Jim Crenner

KORBACH'S FIRST STOP is Paris, but Paris, with its own cultural partisans and provocateurs, and the long shadow of the KGB seems too much like Moscow with better restaurants. Sasha decides to cross the Atlantic. Indeed, we first meet him on August 10, 1983, as he steps off a plane in New York, an H-1 visa and $1,500 in his pocket. America bestows upon him the unexpected gift of anonymity. In fact, America decides to ignore him completely.

The darling of the international salons is greeted at the airport only by another former Soviet intellectual, now a New York taxi driver. On the drive from the airport to Manhattan, Korbach is suddenly blinded by the glow of the red sun and mistakes a Jewish cemetery for a cluster of skyscrapers. At that moment he becomes aware of a vague menace, "an approach of something fundamentally inhuman," in this new, unfamiliar environment. Later, in his new friend's apartment, he discovers that his old self has all but disappeared, leaving him in a state of strange emptiness and immateriality: "I don't want anything, don't see anything, don't hear anything, don't say anything. I am going round at the edges, or, better yet, I'm spreading out in space. I'm lying supine. You weren't strong enough to go to the camps, so now, stretch yourself out in the void."

But just as things begin to look interesting, strange and disconnected events start to pile up and pull the narrative in the most unexpected directions. While wandering at night near Times Square, Alex suddenly sees "Alexander Korbach" written in the sky in bright neon signs. As it turns out, it is the name of a New York department store established years ago by the Polish-Jewish branch of the Korbach clan. It has grown since into a gigantic financial empire run by Alex's distant cousin, Stanley Korbach.

Stanley is a crazy millionaire with grand designs on the world, who occasionally overshadows Alex as the book's main protagonist. He is clearly a visitor from another novel. A philosopher and a mystic obsessed with genealogies, he is visited by visions of a certain Kor-beit, an ancient tanner from Jerusalem, whom he believes to be the founder of the Korbach family. Under anesthesia Stanley speaks in biblical Hebrew, and his enigmatic butler seems to be the Eternal Jew himself. They both appear to be on some mysterious mission that requires the dispersal of Stanley's gigantic fortune, although the details of the plan are never fully revealed. It is quite possible that Stanley wants to create a new Chosen People out of the Korbachs and their relatives. Needless to say, almost everybody is related to them.

As the novel unfolds, we find Alex working in a parking garage in Los Angeles, befriending Stanley, and falling in love with a mysterious beauty, who turns out to be Stanley's oldest daughter Nora. He starts selling drugs for the Russian mafia in California, and is miraculously restored to his fame and glory, and becomes a theater director in America, and starts to film *The Radiance of Beatrice* for a Hollywood studio, and is made chairman of Stanley's charitable foundation. Meanwhile Nora, an archaeologist married to an Arab millionaire with possible terrorist connections, goes on a space mission during which she also has visions, and then leaves Alex for no apparent reason, and then reappears and leaves again, having first given him a son named Philip Jazz Korbach. Alex goes back to Moscow, where we see him on a barricade in 1991, during the revolution that deposed Gorbachev and installed Yeltsin. Then he is back in the States, and his movie deal is canceled. And the incessant swirl of the narration is interspersed with twelve rambling, obscure poems, some of which seem to imitate the Russian Symbolists, some the American Beats.

AKSYONOV TAKES SOME utterly predictable swipes at America and its usual suspects: rich liberals ("enchanting oblong faces, self-effacing smiles of the East Coast intelligentsia"), the commercialized culture ("the chance to be a real artist comes along less often than a jackpot in Atlantic City"), feminism, political correctness, the lack of perfect equality and justice ("just be a member of the gang and everything will be fine.") It soon becomes obvious, however, that Aksyonov's America, where most of the action takes place, is not an entirely real place. It is a curious mixture of cliché and fantasy. California occasionally changes its name into Ochichornia (a mispronounced title of a popular

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Russian song) and Los Angeles into Los Arkhangelsk. American executives drink like Russians and use the argot of Soviet party aparatchiks. ("All of our employees have to demonstrate an unimpeachably cosmopolitan attitude towards our customers....") There are drunken brawls in upscale Manhattan restaurants. Combat troops hired by Stanley and his arch-enemy Norman Blamsdale wage deadly battles in the streets of New York. At the end of the novel, the apparently bankrupt Stanley gathers his bizarre array of friends, including the newly reconciled Alex and Nora, in Israel, where Nora has just dug out the body of Kor-beit preserved in honey. It turns out that the ancient tanner is Alex's exact double, all the way to his deformed toenail. This discovery seems to astonish the writer as much as it astonishes his protagonists.

ALL THIS MAY seem like good material for a juvenile philosophical slapstick in the manner of early Vonnegut. (Stanley Korbach bears a clear resemblance to Vonnegut's Mr. Rosewater.) There are passages that seem to be a fantasy taking place entirely inside the head of a forlorn émigré, in which America and Russia blend, and self-pity mixes with unrealistic dreams of success and power. There is a certain pathos to this confusion; but the novel does not fulfill even this expectation. It seems to overflow with inventiveness, as each chapter introduces scores of new and promising characters and ideas; but underneath it is strangely inert and dull. "The plot thickens," Alex thinks, upon receiving an invitation to Stanley's country estate. In fact, the novel has hardly any plot at all, no intrigue, no drama, no mystery or suspense, and no real complications. It is only an arbitrary sequence of events linked together by the writer's fancy.

And the writer, like the reader, seems to get bored with his inventions. Characters and plot lines suddenly disappear or are allowed to fade away, as if by the author's inattention. When visiting Russia Alex buys, with Stanley's backing, a factory that used to belong to his ancestors. We never hear about it again. When the Russian mafia tries to take over Stanley's Moscow philanthropy fund, we never even learn if it was successful. An aura of mystery is purposefully built around Nora's husband, but at the end of the novel we see him only as a publisher of an anti-Israeli Middle Eastern newspaper. Stanley remarks that Nora, too, has a dark secret, but we never learn what it was.

Aksyonov may be aware of the inchoateness of his novel. For the loquacious, occasionally impertinent narrator tries to convince the reader that what looks like narrative sloppiness is actually a part of the fun:

> Sometimes things work out very strangely in modern thick novels! The author gets all wrapped up in figuring how to move his bulky creation along, and in the meantime one group of characters is rebelling against another. It gets scary for the author when he realizes that such conspiracies undermine the very foundations of his mini-universe: the subject, fundamental structure, and even the central offices and giant corporations with their unequaled charitable trusts.

Moving this unnecessarily bulky creation along seems indeed like a formidable task; and one wonders whether the effort is really worth it.

The deluge of incongruous elements drowns and diminishes the few interesting issues that bounce around the novel's enormous hull. Upon hearing that the Soviet Union is collapsing, for example, Alex unexpectedly breaks down, crying: "I spent my whole life in the sinister USSR—what had I got to be glad about? Avreli, prizewinner, without the dirty Soviet motherland, I can't.... I'm dying." He seems to be hinting at some psychological symbiosis between a Soviet writer (even an anti-Soviet Soviet writer) and the "sinister" reality against which he used to define himself. I would certainly like to hear more about such a symbiosis. And what does Alex really mean when he says, after capriciously humiliating one of his lovers, that "in this postmodern neo-Byronism of ours ... we may be discovering something in the way of self-expression but nothing in the way of love"? The disconnected remarks scattered throughout Aksyonov's book seem to hint at profundities that the novel has no intention of exploring. And despite several, often contradictory clues, we never learn what Dante and "the new sweet style" is really doing here. Even in a comic novel, such things require some sort of resolution.

SOME CRITICS HAVE tried to place Aksyonov within the great tradition of the Russian tragic-grotesque that runs from Gogol to Bely, Bulgakov, Babel, and Platonov. The comparison has little justification. As Nabokov showed in his lecture on Gogol, the Russian grotesque uses deformation and farce for more complex literary reasons. It absorbs everything that is mundane, trivial, and ludicrous in everyday life, and transforms it into a metaphor of the inevitable absurdity and failure of all human endeavors. But this kind of transformation happens very rarely in Aksyonov's breezy, improvised prose, and it is nowhere to be found in *The New Sweet Style*. Besides, the tragic-grotesque does not tolerate formal or intellectual negligence. All its famous practitioners, from Gogol to Beckett, were known to be extravagantly meticulous writers.

When asked to describe his own literary origins Aksyonov usually mentions Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of the "carnivalesque." The Russian philosopher and theorist of culture even makes a brief appearance in the novel as one of Korbach's early mentors. Bakhtin considered the carnival—the popular festivities of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—as the release of the salutary spirit of anarchy that is forever simmering in culture's lower strata. He saw it as an anti-authoritarian impulse that subverts and mocks all hierarchies, and introduces the element of playful relativism into the world of social, ideological, or aesthetic rigidity. Whenever the spirit of the carnival enters the domain of art or literature, it produces a parade of fragmented or unfinished forms, stylistic inconsistencies, discordant points of view, ideas that are constantly contradicted, and ambiguous or paradoxical moral lessons.

For the Russian philosopher, the most complete actualization of the "carnivalesque" in literature was the novel, which he considered a kind of anti-genre trying to absorb and to undermine all other literary genres, especially the epic and the lyric poetry. Using Rabelais as his main example (but also, surprisingly, Dostoyevsky), Bakhtin tried to demonstrate that the novel is by its very nature a protean, polyphonic, self-questioning form that precludes any direct, "objective" messages. For Bakhtin, this also made the novel a perfect weapon against dogmatism and orthodoxy.

Since Bakhtin wrote his most important works in the years when Stalin was consolidating his power and art in the Soviet Union was being forced into the service of the state, it is quite possible that he tried to build into his theory a kind of secondary line of defense: by declaring realism artificial and "bourgeois," and by praising the "carnivalesque" as truly revolutionary and egalitarian, Bakhtin may have been preparing a "Marxist" response to socialist realism. If this was indeed his strategy, it did not work. Socialist realism won; and Bakhtin's work on Rabelais condemned, and he spent most of his life in almost total obscurity.

In the 1960s, however, Bakhtin's theories were discovered by poststructuralist criticism, and by the Western counterculture together with its Eastern European counterpart. Aksyonov's generation was drawn to Bakhtin precisely because he

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seemed to offer a refutation of socialist-realism, and to provide a scholarly justification for youthful irreverence towards authority. Yet "the carnivalesque" is a hazardous notion, as an artistic strategy and as a mode of social behavior. It constantly tempts the artist with spurious freedom from the obligations of his craft. The supposedly open forms that it favors can too easily be used as an omnibus excuse for aesthetic sogginess and a lack of reflective discipline. The "carnivalesque" does not encourage strenuous thinking. It is the opposite of wit. It also cannot be sustained for too long. A carnival that does not know how to end becomes a nightmare, and a prison of its own. As a form of social protest, a way of declaring one's independence or "setting one's mind free," it is almost universally accompanied by frustration and futility—a rebellion of gesture, not a rebellion of thought.

IT IS PERHAPS no accident that bizarre, fantastic plots started to dominate Aksyonov's fiction after the infamous dressing down of writers and artists by Khrushchev in 1963, which marked the beginning of the end of the short-lived "thaw." For most of those who were not ready to choose open dissent—that is, to choose imprisonment, labor camps, psychiatric institutions, or banishment from the country—the carnivalesque, the grotesque, all this programmatic unseriousness, often looked like the only way to survive and to work without total capitulation. Hence the proliferation in Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s of cabarets, satirical theaters, and strange, sloppily written books meant to be read "between the lines." The text was merely a mock-up; what really mattered was the subtext, which was created by the audience as much as by the artist.

But a lot has happened since those days of defiant if desperate laughter, in history and in art. Vassily Aksyonov can no longer pretend to be an angry young man sticking his tongue out at Marxist ideologues, or conducting oblique polemics with Khrushchev's definition of art. It is hard to tell why he has chosen to adhere to this anachronistic poetics, which defeats whatever point his novel is trying to make. The problem is also visible, though to a lesser extent, in other books that Aksyonov published in the West. In *The Burn*, the excess and the farce often muddles the otherwise convincing portrait of a tormented generation, and in *The Island of Crimea* it further weakens the already simplistic message of the novel. Even in the realistic *Generations of Winter* and *The Winter's Hero*, Aksyonov finds it necessary to introduce talking animals and "interludes," or weird little narratives mostly unrelated to the main subject. Has the carnival become a habit, a form of nostalgia? Is it just an easy answer to intellectual or psychological challenges?

Aksyonov is at his best when he speaks directly about things that he knows about and cares about. In *The Burn*, it is Tolya's childhood in Magadan that really moves the reader, and in *The New Sweet Style* it is the account of the great confrontation in Moscow in August, 1991. Suddenly the language is terse and precise, and the images are clear and convincing. The characters show genuinely human features. Whatever there is of the grotesque (during a fight a young soldier starts quizzing Alex about the idol of the '60s, the singer Vladimir Vysotsky) arises naturally out of the situation, and not out of the writer's free-floating imagination.

IS AKSYONOV AWARE of his problem? His hero seems to be. If there is a larger theme in the novel, it is Korbach's desperate, frustrated search for a way out of his "genre." Hence his restlessness, his many escapes, his vague dreams about something he calls the "new sweet style." "Once you're on a merry-go-round," he remarks at the beginning of the novel, "you can't jump off anymore. They forget you, and you just carry on flirting with the whole world and think that the world's flirting with you." But the "genre" in which the protagonist is imprisoned is precisely the genre in which the writer has chosen to tell his story. And so the novel narrates its own failure. In this sense, it achieves a kind of success—a sad new definition of the oneness of form and content.

At the end of the novel we find poor Korbach in an awkward situation, as if trapped on both sides of the looking glass. His future unknown, his many projects derailed, he stares into the mummified face of his ancestor-double:

> Receding and approaching, a stunning mask of buffoon's laughter loomed before his eyes, resembling exactly the one that had appeared on his own face in moments of theatrical delight. He himself was receding and approaching, receding and approaching. And now he made contact with something he could not yet understand. This means that this is me, this means that this is me, I, myself, this means that I've been here too, in the form of this singer Sasha Korbach, he thought along with all of that. And receded, and approached, and receded.

The man is in a loop. He has reached the end of the road, but he is unable to stop. Perhaps he has been abandoned there by his creator, who leaves us with the uneasy feeling that the carnival will go on. ■

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NEW YORK DIARIST

Exhaustion Chic

EXHAUSTION WAS IN THE AIR at the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2000 Biennial when I saw the show the other day, and the damn thing hadn't even opened to the public. I wondered how many people would share this impression until I looked at the catalog cover, which is emblazoned with an after-dark video image of an empty shopping cart in an empty parking lot, and realized that the Whitney has embraced exhaustion chic. Extracted from Doug Aitken's *Electric Earth* installation, which follows a man through nighttime Los Angeles, the image is an allegory of an art world that has shopped until it dropped—which takes the museum off the hook if this Biennial fails to bring in the huge crowds that any self-respecting arts organization now demands.

ACTUALLY, THE WHITNEY WAS SHOPPING around a Biennial scandal with audience-building potential well before the show opened its doors. Early in March, the front page of *The New York Times* carried a report on Hans Haacke's planned installation *Sanitation*, under the headline "SIGNS POINT TO NEW 'SENSATION' AT THE WHITNEY." Haacke, an artist known for installations that razz the powers that be, had been asked to dream up something for the Whitney and decided to arrange some garbage cans in front of a wall display that included remarks New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani made last fall about the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. When news of Haacke's plan got out, the mayor was more or less invited to try to shut down the installation, which would present his words in the Gothic typeface favored by the Nazis and include a soundtrack of thumping boots that might suggest Hitler's soldiers taking marching orders from the mayor. But Giuliani sidestepped the Whitney, which in any event receives very little money from the city.

CHANCES ARE THAT *SANITATION* WILL go down as a political art happening that didn't happen—a kind of pre-exhausted protest. In his introduction to the Biennial catalog, which went to press before Haacke's piece was finished, Maxwell Anderson, the museum's director, sees "a notable dulling of the sharper edges of social commentary" on the art scene and fewer artists who are "espousing political or anti-institutional critiques.... Lacking a prevailing spirit of *épater les bourgeois*," he writes, "contemporary art runs the risk of homogeneity." Which suggests that Anderson still believes that old hokum about artists finding their distinct voices by thumbing their noses at the middle class. So it's no surprise that he OK'd Haacke's anti-Giuliani piece. Anderson expected, as he told the *Times*, that "this one will hit a nerve," although he also explained that "on a personal level" he didn't agree with Haacke's analogy likening "various public officials to Nazis." But he wasn't going to be cowed by the Anti-Defamation League, which criticized *Sanitation* for trivializing the Holocaust. He told the *Times* that he and other museum officials thought they were doing the right thing.

ANDERSON IS THE PERFECT ARTS bureaucrat. Personally, he has reservations. Publicly, he is all for hitting a nerve. But if art isn't personal, what on earth is it? I suspect that the nerves Anderson wants to hit have less to do with art than with a crisis mentality that has swirled around the art world since the National Endowment for the Arts controversies began in 1989. As an administrator, Anderson knows that crisis keeps culture in the news—and gives significance to otherwise insignificant art. Indeed, if Giuliani had taken the bait and turned Haacke into an artistic martyr, there is little doubt that Haacke's installation, with its impersonal, corporate style, would have been described as some kind of minimalist political masterpiece—just as, last fall, Chris Ofili's pathetic neofolkloric paintings seemed more lyrical with every new legal brief. Controversy validates art, although the very people who fall hardest would probably deny such a silly old romantic notion. Never mind. We are living with the results. Only Jesse Helms could have propelled Robert Mapplethorpe's slick Art Deco-ish images to a place in the photographic pantheon right next to Edward Weston's purist nudes.

WHENEVER CONTEMPORARY ART IS dragged into the courts, earlier arts controversies, most of which focused on literature, recur in pseudosophisticated minds. But there is a big difference between controversy then and now, because public understanding of James Joyce or D.H. Lawrence was not shaped by the court battles that were fought over their writing. When Joyce's and Lawrence's works fell into the hands of lawyers and judges, their meanings were already clear, which is why they inspired a public debate about shifts in moral standards, about new kinds of truth. Of course, legal strategies certainly involved stretching the truth; an example is Rebecca West's 1960 court appearance in defense of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It was a bit much for West to call the book (hardly Lawrence's best) an "allegory" of a "culture that had become sterile and unhelpful to man's deepest needs." First Amendment lawyers and activists will tell you they are immune to the romantic notion that they are defending a Joyce or a Lawrence every time a live sex show is closed down by the police. When lawyers stand up for x-rated theaters and bookstores, they explain, they're just doing emergency repair jobs on an open society, nothing more. I salute their clearheadedness. But if our society needs plenty of undeluded civil libertarians, we could also do with fewer arts professionals inclined to see new metaphors in every First Amendment controversy an artist manages to provoke. For these people it's always the battle over *Ulysses* all over again—when Judge John Woolsey not only allowed publication of Joyce's novel in the United States but found time to admire "the stream of consciousness with its ever-shifting kaleidoscopic impressions."

ONCE ART PROVOKED CONTROVERSY. Now it seems that controversy can give anything the aura of art. Joyce and Lawrence stood above their run-ins with the law; they gave the battles over freedom of expression a scale, a magic. Andres Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and Ofili are nothing without their controversies; that's what gives their work meaning. It may be that the cycle of controversies that began in the late '80s has now run its course. And, in the absence of a major flare-up, we have a Whitney Biennial in which disaffection has become a parlor game. The painters whip up little controversies about the nature of painting: they reject paint in favor of embroidery thread or puzzle pieces. The video artists are having some kind of argument with the movies: they love them; they want to do something else. One artist, Yukinori Yanagi, has turned Jasper Johns's *Three Flags* into an ant farm, which amounts to a new way of deconstructing Pop Art. At the Whitney's 2000 Biennial the controversies continue, only they are now about nothing except how artists can best contemplate their navels.

JED PERL

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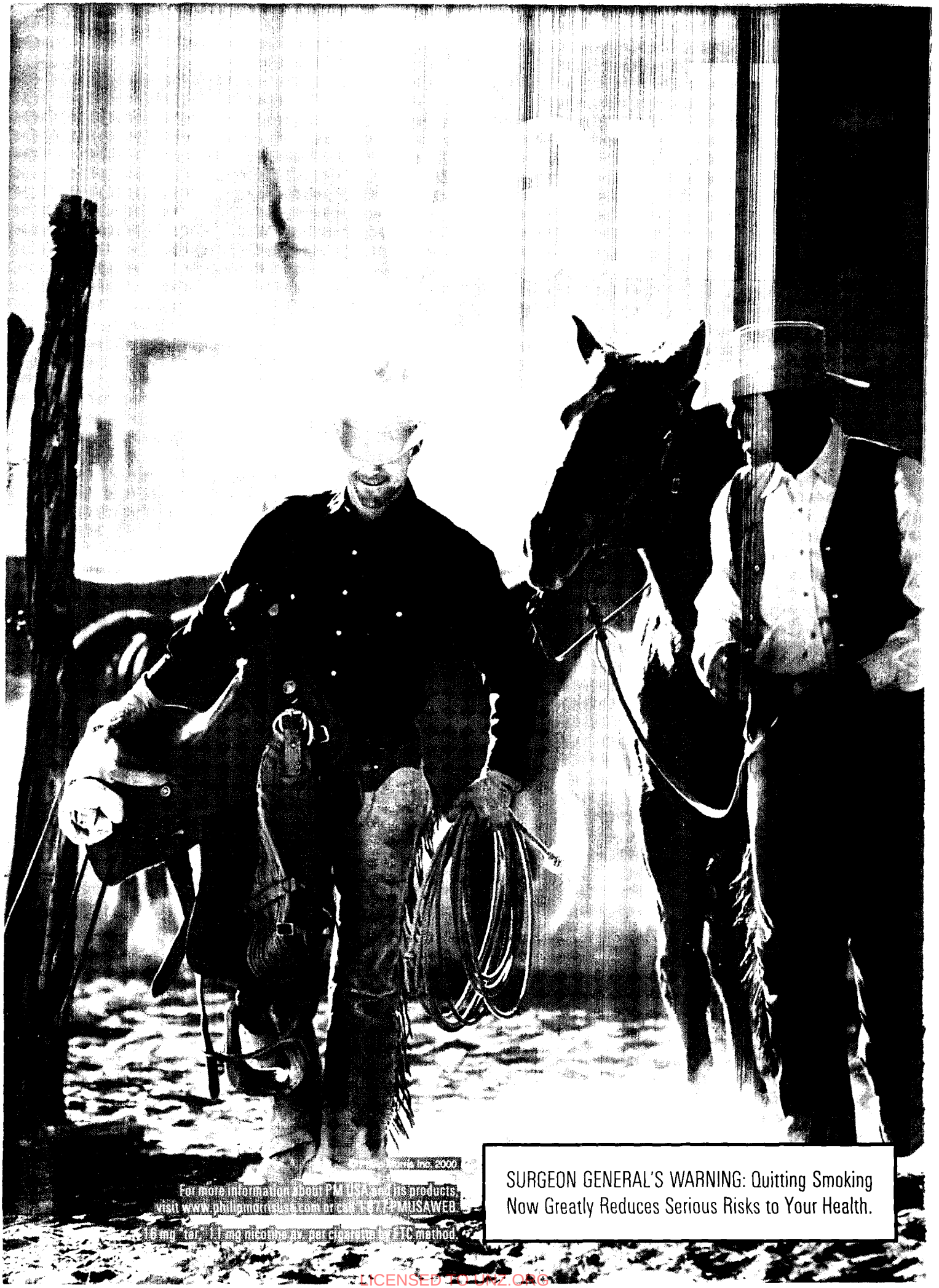
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